

**S. G. DEUSKAR LECTURES ON
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***An Indian Historiography
of India:***

***A Nineteenth-Century
Agenda and its
Implications***

Ranajit Guha



**CENTRE FOR STUDIES
IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA**







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An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications

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LECTURE ONE

THERE was a voice, an educated middle-class Bengali voice, that could be heard throughout the second half of the nineteenth century urging Indians to write their own history. The words by which that voice is most remembered are those of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote in the *Bangadarshan* of 1880 :

Bengal must have her own history. Otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who is to write it ?

You have to write it. I have to write it. All of us have to write it. Anyone who is a Bengali has to write it....

Come, let us join our efforts in, investigating the history of Bengal....It is not a task that can be done by any one person alone; it is a task for all of us to do together.¹

Read Bengal and Bengali as notations often used by the author respectively for India and Indians, and you have an agenda here for a truly Indian historiography of India. It was an agenda in the straightforward sense of the phrase as 'things to be done',² and the strident note of that passage could leave no one in doubt that it was meant for immediate action. Why such urgency? What presuppositions about the past went into the making of this agenda? How was it acted upon? It is our own agenda for a critical historiography and its imperatives that require these questions to be addressed today to that other, ancestral agenda.

There is no way of answering any of these questions without first distinguishing this agenda from its common-

sense construction as a simple recall of the past. The importance of that distinction cannot be emphasized enough. For Bankimchandra's appeal to Bengalis to write their own history has often been linked to the nostalgic strain in some of his writings in such a way as to allow memory to usurp the estate of history. The ideological significance of this metonymic operation can hardly be exaggerated: it amounts to an *atideśa* effect by which a knowledge of the Indian past is converted into a category of Indian nationalist thought. Yet there is a fallacy here—a fallacy of confounding necessary and sufficient conditions. For, although the nineteenth-century agenda for an alternative historiography was ineluctably and necessarily charged with a longing for the past, the latter was not all that this agenda had for its content. Indeed, nostalgia, working on its own, does not produce historiography for a nation any more than it produces autobiography for an individual. The domains of Mnemosyne and Clio always intersect, but seldom coincide.

The remembrance of things past in a people's life and the urge for a people's own historiography have, of course, one thing in common. Both are informed by a notion of the Other. What that Other is may be determined by culture or contingency or by both, as it is often the case. Depending on the character of a cultural idiom or the contingency of an event or circumstance, otherness may be reckoned in biological, environmental, economic or political terms, or in any combination of these. But whatever the kind of alterity, the presence of the Other at any given time always casts a shadow in the form of another time—in the form of a past.

The notion of the Other as another time need not be registered necessarily in a historiography. Under historical conditions where the flow of commodity exchange does not correspond to the linearity of secular time, the past is often recuperated not so much as a point on the path of time's arrow but as a moment of cyclical return. Such moments are variously recorded in our culture in chiliastic fear (as in the fear of *pralaya* that punctuates

the Mahabharata, especially on the eve of a heroic death), in millennial hopes (as in Birsa Munda's homilies on Satjug during the *ulgulan*), in Hindu rituals such as the annual worship of the spirits of dead ancestors, and so on. But whatever their importance, these are no more than relics of that long night of early feudalism during which the near absence or weakness of commodity production arrested the linear movement of time and made it spin around in myths. However, when seven hundred years after Kalhana and three hundred after Abul Fazl, the agenda for an Indian historiography of India came to be constructed by the late nineteenth century, history had already taken over from Purana as the dominant mode of reckoning the past. This mode would henceforth be the vehicle of that alterity which was so essential for any alternative reading of the Indian past. For, by designating itself as 'Indian', that alternative announced its organizing principle as one of distantiation from what was paradigmatically un-Indian, because British and colonialist. Indeed, the sense of the Other which informed the agenda for another historiography was planted in a sense of the pervasive and powerful presence of colonialism.

To acknowledge such a relationship of alterity was, of course, to recognize colonialism as a condition, indeed an essential condition, for the formulation of that agenda. But this did not make of the latter, in any sense, a spiritual gift pressed by British liberalism on India for the benefit of the natives. For, contrary to such a cargo cult theory of culture blithely retailed by imperialist writers and their Indian imitators, the production of a colonialist historiography was from the very outset an exercise in dominance and not an act of charity. It is, therefore, not possible to deal with the question of an Indian historiography of India as anything other than a question of power.

How the writing of history was mediated by the exercise of power can be grasped by considering a nodal

point in the development of the colonial state. At this point, in 1765, the East India Company's conquest of Bengal acquired legitimacy by a Mughal grant enabling it to collect the land revenues of the three Eastern provinces and to administer civil justice on behalf of the Nawab. Known technically as the Company's accession to Diwani—a technicality which, has, alas, made some scholars insensitive to its significance as the truly inaugural moment of the Raj—it brought together in one single instance all the three fundamental aspects of colonialism in our subcontinent, namely, its origin in an act of force, its exploitation of the primary produce of the land as the very basis of a colonial economy, and its need to give force and exploitation the appearance of legality. Much of what was distinctive about British rule in India and set it apart from the Dutch, French and Portuguese regimes elsewhere in Asia, derived precisely from this characteristic combination of politics, economics and law. And it was this combination again which provided the emerging colonial state with a node for structural developments in its apparatus at both the administrative and the ideological levels.

Developments at the first of these levels required that the Company should set up a bureaucracy that was adequate to its dual function as merchants and Diwan, which meant, in effect, the collection of land revenues in order to finance its so-called 'investments'. But India was a country where, for centuries, landed property had been the very foundation of both wealth and prestige, where all aspects of culture, including religion, had land as their common denominator, and the relation between producers, proprietors and the state had evolved over time into a bewildering variety of local patterns according to differences in the regional structures of dominance and economies. Consequently, fiscal operations here depended for their success on an intimate knowledge of traditions, continuities and past procedures—a knowledge of history, for short. The uses of such knowledge had been impressed upon the Company, negatively, since the begin-

ning of its involvement in the land question even before 1765, when its administration of some of the Ceded Districts ran into difficulties because of the refusal of the indigenous specialists to help its officials with their expertise. 'After an infinite deal of trouble we have at last got a full and particular statement of the resources of this province,' wrote an exasperated Harry Verelst and his Council from one such district, namely Chittagong, in 1761. 'The villainous intentions of these people that had the management of the revenues here before endeavouring to secrete from us and make as intricate as possible whatever they could, has delayed [the report] thus long.'³ Complaints of this kind increased many times both in number and bitterness with the Company's graduation to Diwani if only because the territories it was given to administer were considerably larger in extent, the revenues much greater in volume, and the local variations in tenuous structures, customary dues, accounting procedures etc. more numerous, hence more intricate. The inability of its servants to cope with these difficulties was expressed, at every level from the Collector to the Board of Revenue, in a concerted effort to blame their own failure on want of native cooperation. James Grant spoke for all of them when he mentioned what he believed to have been a defalcation of about 15 million rupees of the Company's revenues every year owing to 'the collusive chicanery of native agents, in withholding official intelligence from their new masters, and fraudulently converting the use of such knowledge, to their own private emolument at the public expense.'⁴

These words, written in 1786, twenty-one years after accession to Diwani, were quite obviously the symptom of an unresolved tension characteristic of the early, formative phase of the colonial state. The latter had not quite succeeded yet in replacing the old bureaucracy by an entirely new one. A delay of that order, which is merely the effect of a structural *de'calage*, is characteristic of all state formation. The site of a new state is always cluttered with the remains of the one that preceded it;

and the individuality of each state, as it comes to be formed, derives to no small extent from the quality and degree of resistance put up by the debris through which it has to make its way.

It is significant, therefore, that some of the resistance to the formation of a colonial state in India should have been identified by the first colonialists as a refusal on the part of the natives to share a certain kind of knowledge with them. To notice this is already to take a step towards problematizing the question of colonialist knowledge, to threaten if not subvert the hegemonic assumption about its role as a western wisdom poured into an oriental void, to query whether the native informant represented so often in the archetype of Warren Hastings's pandit had always been a pliant collaborator, and so on. I cannot, alas, digress now into any of these important matters, and must press on to consider the colonialist response to what was perceived as the reluctance of the indigenous specialists to share one particular kind of knowledge—a knowledge of the Indian past.

For a start, let us recall, once again, Grant's strictures upon the 'misconduct of native Hindostanny agents'. Complaints on that score had by this time accreted into a widely-held official opinion constituting, as he said, a 'theme of general declamation'.⁵ By joining in, he lent to such declamation his authority as that of one of the most knowledgeable persons on the subject amongst his contemporaries.⁶ 'The collusive chicanery of native agents' was manifest, according to him, 'in withholding official intelligence from their new masters.' Clearly, this was an indictment uttered in a master's voice. It spoke with the authority of the East India Company as the 'new masters' and required the natives to make their knowledge readily accessible to the masters so that the latter could convert it into 'official intelligence'. The alleged 'chicanery' of the natives consisted, therefore, of their refusal to part with a knowledge that owed nothing to the alien rule to which they had been recently subjected and of their resistance to 'the use of such knowledge' in the 'public' interest—the

word 'public', the first term of a dichotomy hitherto unknown to Indian polity, being understood in this context as the name for an attribute of the master's domain—the domain of the colonial state.

But what was this knowledge that the servants had and the masters were so eager to acquire? To put it in plain language, it was concerned with information about the volume and value of agricultural produce, the rules for appropriation of the producer's surplus by landlords and the state, the nature of land tenures and proprietary institutions, the technicalities of estate accounts and above all, the laws and traditions governing the relationship of peasants, landlords and the state. The skills required to handle one or more aspects of such information on behalf of local societies or governmental agencies had, in pre-colonial India, frozen, like all other skills, into craft-like structures contained within caste-like institutions. The density of such structures and the complexity of such institutions in any region tended to correspond directly to the stability of landlordism and the depth of dependent tenurial relations there. Since the Company, as Diwan, happened to launch on its career as revenue collectors in the eastern provinces with their well-established zamindaries and many-tiered system of subinfeudation, it was no wonder that the first British administrators had hit the hard and intractable end of the traditional expertise in land management. The want of sympathy between the indigenous specialists and the local officials was aggravated further at this stage by the rapacity of the farming system, the ruin of many an ancient landed family under the pressure of excessive revenue demand, the quickening pace of the collections and the displacements caused by the impact of colonialism on a traditional society. The outcome of all this was mutual antagonism and suspicion which vitiated transactions relating to land revenues and made the grudging cooperation elicited from the so-called native agents appear as a vile and exasperating ruse to deceive the Company's officials. Grant expressed the latter's sentiments in his long-winded prose when he set out 'to prove that

through the medium of natives, hitherto almost exclusively employed in real effective operations of finance, we [i.e. the Company] have been... grossly deceived in respect to the nature, form and extent of the annual assessment of Bengal; that such intermediate agents themselves, have always been fully, or more perfectly informed on these subjects, though they withheld their knowledge from European superintendents; and that when they have been regarded, or officially consulted as oracles to determine the most essential rights of government, they have in most cases, stood in the predicament of judge and party against the sovereign ruler... holding in the same hands... all the great offices of state,... together with the entire volume of authentic documents, accounts or official forms, so indispensably necessary to control their conduct with intelligence, while the ruling administration were still unaided by the lights of free extensive self experience.⁷

It would be, of course, some time before such experience was to accumulate to an extent and mature to a degree adequate enough to be effectively opposed to native intrigue. Meanwhile, the territories had to be governed and the revenues collected in order to pay for trade, war and administration, all of which urged the British to break out of what they perceived as a circle of deception. The means used for that purpose was history. Some of the very first and most important works on Indian history written from a British standpoint belong to this period of thirty years between Diwani and Permanent Settlement. Quite a few of these ranged widely over time from antiquity to the most recent past; others were content to take a relatively fore-shortened view of the past going back no further than the thirteenth century. All were conspicuous by their interest in the historical aspects of the land—an interest they shared with the Company's administration which provided most of their authors with their livelihood.

Taken according to the scope and emphasis of their interest in the land question, these historical dissertations could be said to be of three types. The first of these came in the form of comprehensive surveys with the narrative

extended over long periods of time and large parts of the subcontinent. Written up as political histories in which the ruling dynasties served for protagonists and their changing circumstances for plot, these narratives sought to explore the relation between power and property in pursuit of an answer to the question: who owned the land—the king or the landed classes? Alexander Dow's well-known work, *The History of Hindostan*, published in three volumes in 1768-72, was one of the best examples of this type. A second type, overlapping the first to some extent and equally comprehensive in its territorial and temporal surveys, differed somewhat in emphasis. The argument about landed property hinged here on the economic aspect of the land question: how much wealth did the land produce and how was it shared between proprietors and the state under the pre-colonial regimes? A good deal of politics, and that, too, in the form of dynastic histories, entered such narratives of course. But what they were primarily about was political economy—a term which frequently occurs in the works of Grant, one of the best writers of this genre. The third type differed from the other two in scope. It did not have their subcontinental sweep, but focussed on the relationship of power and property at the local level. Written up, in most cases, as official reports and still buried in the archives, narratives of this type are among the first local histories we have of colonial India. These, too, were concerned with the problem of proprietorship and power, but only on the much smaller scale of region and estate. The question which prompted the production of these reports was, in its general form: how much of his share of the produce did the landlord pass on to the state?

These three types of narratives, taken together, stand for the beginnings of a colonialist historiography of India. Each of these had the material and political interests of the emerging colonial state branded on it as a birthmark. None had anything to do with the promotion of a liberal culture among the subject population. They were all the consequence of the Company's urge to inform itself about

the character and value of landed property, so that it could reduce its dependence on wily native intermediaries and use the office of the Diwan to maximize and systematize the collection of revenues. Which makes one wonder why of all possible means it was history that was summoned to rescue the 'new masters' from the deceptions supposed to have been perpetrated by their indigenous servants. For if the latter had deceived the British authorities at all, they had done so not by any superior knowledge of history but by what the Company's officers themselves had identified as a traditional knowledge about a highly specialized technique of land management.

Grant himself paid a tribute to the power of that technique as he described what he thought was its abuse by a native specialist, a certain mutsuddi, who, he wrote, was 'endowed with greater cunning or secrecy [than anyone else] in his profession; [and was] more skilled in the detail of the exchequer dues; the fraudulent emolument of the zamindars and other officers of government; practical arts in composing or decyphering revenue accounts; dividing, sub-dividing, inter-mixing, annexing, reducing, or entirely concealing portions of rent and territory....'⁸ Put in such terms, clearly paranoiac terms, with the string of gerunds quivering as if on the verge of a hysteric fit, the 'practical arts' of accounting are made to look like a particularly sinister sort of black art. In a passage I have already cited, Grant had indeed referred contemptuously to the native specialists as 'oracles'. False oracles, no doubt. But the contempt for them was not altogether free from a fear of that unknown power of indigenous knowledge which made the European feel insecure so often while abroad in Asia and Africa. That fear was the unmistakable sign of an ethnological encounter. For the Western observer, whether he was there as a traveller, adventurer, scientist or administrator, regarded the withholding of an indigenous knowledge of any kind invariably as an assertion of ethnic identity, which excluded him, by that very gesture, as an alien. The fear and indeed the sense of humiliation generated by the want of access to what he

thought was his by virtue of an undefined racial, cultural or spiritual superiority, or simply by right of conquest, as in the present case, could be compensated by generalizations about native character and society as devoid of all that stood for positive values in the alien's own society and character. Sociologies, histories, philosophies, theologies, literature, jokes and downright abuse could all be made to serve as the vehicle for such generalizations in a many-sided repertoire of racist discourse. One has only to look up the Board of Revenue records of the 1770s and 1780s to realize how a good deal of the sentiment and at least some of the language which go with the sport of Paki-bashing in parts of Britain today had already been anticipated by the East India Company's administrators in their desperation to make up for the hurt they felt on being denied access to a body of indigenous knowledge they believed they had a right to use as 'official intelligence'. By blaming such inaccessibility on native cunning, secrecy and deception, they merely acknowledged defeat and accepted that, as aliens, they would never qualify for initiates.

So they turned to history—to history as ethnology's surrogate. They realized that the Indian specialist would not share his knowledge with them, and decided therefore to acquire a knowledge of pre-colonial conditions of the agrarian economy and property relations by a historical investigation of the Indian past. But such a recovery of the past was bound to make for a very different kind of knowledge from the one denied. The latter was of course informed by a sense of the past, but it did not constitute for the specialists a historical past. It was with them a past made up of discrete moments recovered synchronically as the occasion required. In this sense, the recall by, say, the zamindari *amla* of who owned which estate generations ago, what was collected as *abwab* and paid as *jama*, was not very different from the recall of ancestral names, kinship transactions, ritual procedures, etc. by priests, marriage brokers, genealogists and other traditional specialists who, too, dipped into the past ever so often for infor-

mation but did not negotiate it as a diachronic flow, that is, never as history.

The British, by contrast, had to historicize the Indian past in order to have access to it. But historicization, like the formation of the colonial state, could not be achieved except by the operation of metropolitan rules and models on native material. The material which had to be historicized, was of course the sum of all existing narratives—annals, chronicles, anecdotes, folklore, etc.—but the narratology brought to bear on such material was that of contemporary European, specifically, whig historiography. All the three types of late eighteenth-century East India historiography mentioned above bore the marks of this operation. Thus, Alexander Dow's macro-political *History of Hindostan* relied, by his own admission, primarily on Firishtah's early seventeenth-century chronicle, but gave it, in the third volume, a narrative closure that was characteristic of the post-Renaissance historiography of Europe, a closure for want of which, as Hayden White has observed, a chronicle could never qualify as a proper historical discourse.⁹ Again, Grant's macro-economic dissertation, which announced its historiographical conceit in its title, *An Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Finances of Bengal; Chronologically arranged in different periods from the Mogul Conquest to the present time, etc.* sought consciously to impose the discipline of the eighteenth-century European model on its unruly material gathered from all varieties of Persian accounts, oral tradition, genealogies and chronicles. He rejected the narrative mode of his primary sources in which concentration on detail often obscured the perspective on general issues and adopted instead the broad survey as the mode suited to 'the magnitude of our present subject of inquiry.' Also, in conformity to current practice, he calibrated his narrative according to the relative importance of the fiscal units and departed thereby, again, from the absurdity of the attempt, characteristic of his primary sources, 'to exhibit... the vast financial operations of a mighty empire... partially by undefined unwieldy provinces, and partly by the frittered

divisions of an insignificant hamlet."¹⁰ In local history, too, like the one that came in with a letter from Samuel Davis, Assistant on deputation to the Collector of Bhagalpur, it would be easy to see a typically eighteenth-century European notion of the past struggling with an assortment of oral traditions, genealogical tables, patwari accounts and old men's memories to produce a narrative which the senior members of the government in Calcutta might recognize as 'a general historical account of the zemindars and zemindaries' of Pargana Monghyr.¹¹ There was no Indian history written by a British author during the late eighteenth century which did not show signs of such struggle.

We have spoken of the beginnings of colonialist historiography as a history of turbulence. Far from being a benign gift of metropolitan liberalism, it was complicit to a project that turned conquest into occupation. The issue of an ethnological encounter, it was a knowledge devised to aid a foreign power forcibly to exploit the resources of our land. And far from being the smooth, self-confident discourse that it grew up to be in the nineteenth century under the impact of Mill's *History of British India*, it was, during the first thirty-five years or so after Diwani, a rather awkward genre in which native content and alien form were still not at peace with each other in the body of the narrative. We wanted to emphasize this turbulence in order to remind ourselves that no colonialist knowledge had ever been anything but an intrusion even at the hour of its debut. Like every other aspect of colonialism—like a battle of Plassey or the arrival of an East Indiaman on the Hugli or the setting up of a filature in a Birbhum village—it had always to make its way through friction. Historiography, too, had to do so.

It follows from what has been said so far that the early official attempt to historicize the Indian past amounted to a technical exercise. Its purpose was not so much to promote historiography as to enable the East

India Company to end its dependence on the indigenous method of storing and retrieving information about landed property and land management. It was, like any other technical knowledge, instrumental in character, a knowledge focussed accurately and exclusively on the end for which it was devised, namely, the collection of revenues. There was hardly anything in this narrow specialization that could be expected to generate a movement towards encouraging Indians to write their own history. On the contrary, it was from the Indian point of view, an adversary knowledge which inspired some of the most obnoxious governmental procedures such as the scrutiny of zamindari accounts and cadastral surveys and measurements. The former was bitterly resented by the proprietors, while the peasants' resistance to the latter developed into jacqueries in a number of districts.

Where, then, should we situate the impulse for the agenda invoked at the beginning of these lectures? The answer that readily comes to one's mind is, of course, education. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, education had already established itself as the most distinctive aspect of westernization in our culture. Bankimchandra took notice of this when, in 1886, he observed, 'The term *sikshita* has become the usual designation for those who have been educated in the western mode,' and went on to define the *sikshita* negatively as Indians who had been alienated from traditional learning by the very nature of such education. 'They are not to be blamed for this,' he remarked. 'This is the natural consequence of their education... Nowdays the numbers of the *sikshita* community conform to the western mode of thinking from their very infancy, and are not acquainted at all with the ancient Indian modes of thought...' ¹² Ironically, however, it is by identifying *siksha* thus as antonymous to *vidya* and education as a displacement of tradition that Bankimchandra identified himself as one of the community of the *sikshita*. Since the beginning of the century, since its second decade to be precise, the latter had come to believe in education as merely another mode of thinking.

This was indeed how colonialism wanted education to be thought. All its agencies, private and public, secular and missionary, projected education exclusively in the image of a spiritual operation on the native mind. 'To animate intellectual exertion and facilitate the acquirement of knowledge' was what an official of the Committee of Public Instruction described as the aim of the institutions under its control.¹³

But how true was that description? Did education have nothing other than intellectual exertion and advancement of knowledge as its content? Was it simply the code of an alternative culture? Although colonialism and the many-sided thrust of liberal politics made it out to be so, there was more to education than was thus conceived. It stood not only for enlightenment but also authority—a fact which it has been the function of ideology in all its forms, including historiography, to hide both from the educators and the educated. In other words, it was an ideological effect that made both the propagators and the beneficiaries of education regard the latter as a purely cultural transaction and ignore that aspect of it which related directly to power. Taking the transactional metaphor one step further, one could say that if propagating and benefiting, giving and receiving, were to be regarded as a semiosis, education would not figure in it as a denotative code of culture. On the contrary, it would be found, on a closer look, to have functioned at two different, though related, levels of expression, each with a different content assigned to it. At one level, that content was culture, and at another, power. Education, under the historical conditions of British rule, made thus for a connotative structure of the kind in which, as Hjelmslev has argued, expression and content were asymmetrically superimposed on each other to constitute a layered text. Or, one could say (following Umberto Eco's adaptation of the same structure) that education was a text whose content was a multi-levelled discourse formed by the coupling of a code of culture and a code of power.¹⁴

We speak of this complexity in order to demonstrate

how education related to colonial dominance not only as a means of persuasion, but as an arm of its coercive apparatus as well. The latter is a fact of history which the ideology of liberalism, in its eagerness to display education merely in a hegemonic role, would rather forget. But there is a great deal of evidence to the contrary. Philip Francis, the first of the Company's officers to grasp the importance of education for the formation of a colonial state and far more astute in this respect than Warren Hastings himself, had recommended, as early as 1775, the schooling of native youths in English as a condition for their recruitment into the bureaucracy. 'If...the English language could be introduced into the transaction of business,...it would be attended with convenience and advantage to Government and no distress or disadvantage to the natives,' he wrote in a letter to Lord North. 'To qualify themselves for employment, they would be obliged to study English instead of Persian. If schools were established in the districts,...a few years would produce a set of young men qualified for business, whose example and success would spread, and graft the institution gradually into the manners of the people.'¹⁵ Some fifty years later when the Raj had finally come to its own, the Committee of Public Instruction was to pick up precisely that state-building theme and observe that the institutions under its superintendence, though not connected with the Fort William College, had 'one object common with it—the training up of a class of Public Officers in whose example and influence the moral and intellectual improvement of the people [might] be confidently anticipated.'¹⁶ Francis's eighteenth-century idea was incorporated into the vision of a post-revolutionary bourgeois state run by the bureaucracy as a 'universal class' in whom efficiency would be fruitfully wedded to virtue—power to culture.

However, under the conditions of colonial rule, that is, the rule of a post-revolutionary bourgeoisie in a state without citizenship, such a vision was bound to end up in a caricature. And so it did. What most of the first beneficiaries of education imbibed from it as a code of culture

was a superficial Anglicism amounting to a mimicry of the vigorous liberalism of metropolitan England. To say this is not to tarnish the brilliance of the fifteen or so brave Derozians¹⁷ who have always provided the cult of Bengal Renaissance with its quotes on reason and reform, nor to diminish the youthful charm of their inconsequential defiance of convention which never fails to remind us, as a community of equally inconsequential intellectuals, that once we were young. But with the exception of that illustrious minority, whose whimsicalities are often unhistorically assimilated to the far more momentous, far more difficult, and indeed qualitatively different struggles and achievements of Rammohun Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar as those respectively of a predecessor and a successor—with our homage paid to them as is appropriate, what we are left with is a sprawling mediocrity given to boast its uncritical imitation of the West as a cultural achievement. The shallow and purely mimic character of that culture was recognized as such and reproached not by the troglodytes of Hindu conservatism alone, but also by some of those who were amongst the educated themselves and had come to know that phenomenon at first hand. How they tried to distance themselves from that Anglo-Indian charade could be sensed, for instance, from what was evidently Michael Madhusudan Dutt's own comment, as he put it in the mouth of a character in his play, *Ekei Ki Bawley Sabhyota?* There a middle-class woman explodes in utter disgust when her young and educated husband returns home at the end of an evening of debauchery and makes a racket under the influence of alcohol. 'It seems,' she says, 'that the only knowledge cultivated really well by many of the educated in Calcutta nowadays is that [of womanizing and drinking]... And these shameless creatures go on boasting that they have become cultured like the sahibs. To gorge oneself on wine and meat and dally—is that how one becomes cultured? Is this what you call culture?' (Act II, Sc. 2)¹⁸

At one point in the play, its hero, the educated debauchee, meets his cronies at a club called 'The Asso-

ciation of the Ocean of Knowledge' (Jnanatarangini Sabha), but used in fact for the cultivation of carnal knowledge and consumption of liquor, and inaugurates the evening's merriments with a little speech thus: 'Gentlemen, this country is at present like a vast prison for us; this club house alone is our hall of liberty, our palace of freedom; you may feel free to do whatever you like.' He concludes in English with the words, 'Gentlemen, in the name of freedom, let us enjoy ourselves,' asks for drinks to be served, and calls upon the two whores hired for the occasion to begin the nautch. 'Come open the ball, my beauties,' he commands, again in English. (Act II, Sc. 1)¹⁹ The prison mentioned in this speech stood, of course, for Hindu conservatism and not colonial subjection; the phrases, 'liberty' and 'freedom', were meant to militate only against values and relations internal to Hindu society and not against those that inhered in the power structure of the Raj. All of which goes to show how words and ideas that had served for political dynamite in Europe had their critical charge doused and defused by colonialist education in our subcontinent. Indeed, what most of the nineteenth-century beneficiaries of that education imbibed from it as a code of power was unquestioning servility to the ruling power.

The progress of such education as a measure of increasing middle-class acquiescence to colonialism was abundantly clear to Sivnath Shastri when he looked back on it in the early years of our century. 'As the paramountcy of the English came to be more and more firmly established from year to year,' he wrote, 'as the legal, juridical and other institutions for governance were gradually built up, and businessmen arrived from England in large numbers and set up commercial firms in Calcutta, the native inhabitants, and especially the middle-class families of Calcutta amongst them, were increasingly seized with the urge to have their children educated in the English manner.'²⁰ The connection between the urge for education and the consolidation of the Raj, noticed here by Shastri, had ideological effects which were soon to be made explicit

by the *bhadralok*'s response to the Mutiny. The difficulty of reconciling that response with the nomination of our educated nineteenth-century forbears as pioneers of a freedom movement is a conundrum on which the problematic of Indian history under British rule will continue to turn for a long time yet.

In dealing with that conundrum, we who are spiritual successors to the alumni of the first colonial schools, are quite understandably rather more circumspect than were the insurgents of Hamirpur in Uttar Pradesh at the outbreak of the Mutiny. There, on 14 June, 1857—we quote from an eye-witness account published soon afterwards—‘the sowars attended by a number of *badmashes* of the place, began to parade through the streets armed with swords and latties, and put to the sword every Christian and every Bengalee whom they could suspect of an acquaintance with English.’²¹ What must have been, by and large, an illiterate crowd of mutineers and small-town poor, appears thus to have acted according to a view they came to take of education as an exercise in politics by another name. It is salutary, therefore, for us to recognize that such a view, formed not by learning but by understanding born of oppression and exploitation, is corroborated by any learned reading of historical evidence as well.

For some of that evidence, one may turn to a number of essays written by students of the Hindu College in answer to the question: ‘Has Europe or Asia benefited most by the discovery of the passage round the Cape of Good Hope to India?’ These essays were proudly exhibited by the school authorities at a prize-giving ceremony in January 1828. Here is an excerpt from one of the essays. ‘Of all the nations of Europe... the English have derived the greatest advantage by this passage... On the other hand it must be acknowledged, that it has also, in some measure, contributed to the good of Asia, particularly in the countries under the British sway; for in the time of the Mohammedan tyrants, nothing but luxury and oppression prevailed among the nobles; they had properly speaking, no fixed laws for the administration of justice.

In fact, the Natives suffered the most mortifying proofs of their cruelties, until Providence, to avert the evil, brought them under the illustrious sway of the English, who not only freed this country from their hands, but have adopted all possible measures for its amelioration, introducing arts, sciences, schools, academies and colleges for the dissemination of knowledge.' Another student, too, concluded in much the same vein, saying that as a result of that discovery 'we are safe every way, improving in literature and the sciences day by day, and shall continue to do so as long as the British patronizing sway shall rule over us.'²²

Quite clearly, the politics of collaboration caught the natives young. The youthful enthusiasm for western science and literature and the institutions set up to promote these were obviously predicated on an appreciation of 'the illustrious sway of the English'. After that there would be only one short step for the student to take before maturing into a committed loyalist as he left school for employment at a lower rung of the colonial administration or with a British mercantile firm or for a career in one of the liberal professions or simply for a life of leisure as an absentee landlord.

It was this loyalist, political aspect of education that was rudely exposed by the violence of the Hamirpur uprising. By contrast, the colonial authorities went on insisting on its sanitized, intellectual function alone, as they did when they tried to explain why the schoolboy encomia addressed to the Raj were considered good enough for publication in the official journal. These were published, they said, 'not with reference to any opinions they contain[ed], but solely with a view to their literary character, and to shew the progress that [had] been made by the Hindoo students in European History and Composition.'²³ There is little in this apology to show that education was indeed quarantined from 'opinions'. The latter, understood broadly as politics, was explicit in the self-assurance with which the educators nominated the discovery of the route to India as a theme of 'European History' and *not* of South Asian history.

What constituted the politics of such thematization was its attempt to persuade Indians to take pride in an event that made for their subjection to a number of Western powers culminating in the establishment of British paramountcy by an act of conquest. To teach Indians to appreciate that discovery as a triumph and an achievement, when triumph meant their own defeat and achievement the loss of independence, was clearly a lesson in power meant to educate the colonized to interpret the past not in terms of their own interests, but those of the colonizers. Education in history was thus designed as a servant's education—an education to conform undeviatingly to the master's gaze in regarding the past. It served the project of imperial dominance by annexing the past in order to preempt its use by the subject people as a site on which to assert their own identity. Any progress made by Indians in the study of this genre of history could only be a measure of the success with which they had been taught to yield to the processes of such colonialist appropriation. There was nothing in this education, tailored meticulously to fit British imperial interests and the British point of view, to allow any distinctively Indian approach to the South Asian past. It would be in vain therefore to try and seek the impulse for an Indian historiography of India in this education.

The education we have discussed so far was anglo-phone education. It was the English language which functioned within that educational system as the purveyor of the knowledge it had for its content. As such, that language was complicit to both the codes, that is, the code of power and the code of culture, which gave education its meaning for colonizers and colonized in their roles, respectively, of educators and educated. To regard that complicity simply as instrumental in character would be to underestimate it. For it was, in a real sense, constitutive. The customary description of English as the medium of instruction would be of little help unless the



medium were understood, in this instance, to have been integral to the message.

The importance of English as an emblem of power within the system of education was not the result of official sponsorship alone. Even before governmental agencies for education were set up, the schooling of Bengali boys had already begun at a number of Eurasian institutions. Thanks to that initiative, English gained recognition increasingly as a source of prestige for anyone with even a slight command of the language. Two of this first generation of scholars have been immortalized by Sivnath Shastri. Both of them went to Arratoon Petrus's school. Known as Nitai Sen the One-eyed and Advaita Sen the Cripple of Kolutola, 'they could speak and write in a sort of broken English without any sense of grammar at all. Consequently,' wrote Shastri, 'the reputation and prestige they enjoyed in the contemporary Calcutta society knew no bounds. They used to flaunt their elevated status at *jatras* and other large festive gatherings by turning up in *kaba chapkan* [loose, flowing robes worn by aristocrats] and brocaded shoes. People used to look upon them with reverence.'²⁴

Going by this evidence, English, as a status-marker, was, at this early stage, obviously on a par with such insignia of social importance as courtly apparel. The latter was, for its wearers, a mark of high social standing in pre-colonial India. In much the same way, the language of the colonial rulers enhanced the social standing of any native who used it, even if he did so without proficiency. English managed thus to insinuate itself into education's code of power even at this early date. But it did so only in an iconic sense. Just as their suits of *kaba chapkan* made the two youths of Kolutola look like noblemen, so did a smattering of English make them sound like the *sahibs*. Which shows that with these early nineteenth-century learners, the language, as a signifying system, worked on the principle of similarity rather than on that of contiguity,²⁵ and had, therefore, not fully realized its potential yet as a linguistic form. One could indeed say, after Vološinov, that it was still trapped in the 'process

of recognition' and had not quite made it to the 'process of understanding'.²⁶ According to him, these processes correspond to the two states of a language respectively as signal and sign. Language, as signal, is still not adequate to itself as a linguistic form. 'Should a linguistic form remain only a signal, recognized as such by the understander, it, then, does not exist for him as a linguistic form.' Signalization involves the use of words as 'simply a technical means for indicating this or that object (some definite, fixed object) or this or that action (likewise definite and fixed).' It often dominates the teaching and learning of a foreign language. 'In the process of mastering a foreign language,' writes Vološinov, 'signality and recognition still make themselves felt, so to speak, and still remain to be surmounted, the language not yet fully having become language.' He illustrates this by a reference to an obviously primitive method of instruction in the Russian language thus: 'A word extracted from context, written down in an exercise book, and then memorized together with its Russian translation undergoes signalization, so to speak.'²⁷

The similarity between this mode of instruction and the teaching of English in the early nineteenth-century Calcutta schools should be evident from what both Rajnarayan Basu and Sivnath Shastri had to say on the subject. To quote from the latter,

In those days, no one cared to give lessons in grammar nor teach the pupils how to construct sentences. Attention was limited primarily to the teaching of English words and their meanings. The greater the number of English words and their meanings memorized by a person, the greater was his renown and standing as one with an excellent education in English. . . . Consequently, some young lads would try and commit an entire English dictionary to memory. There were many schools where at the end of the day the pupils were made to recite English words in the same way as they recited multiplication tables. Thus: Philosopher—*Bijnalok*, Ploughman—*Chasha*, Pumpkin—*Laukumro*, Cucumber—*Shosha*.²⁸

But an 'English education' of this kind, which 'had little more than the mere language for its object'²⁹—that was the official description of the phenomenon of signalization

—could not cope with the needs of power and culture in a maturing colonial state. For, although such education provided young Indians with ‘a sufficient command of [English] for conducting the details of official duty’ and with ‘qualification as copyist[s] and accountant[s]’, it did not prepare them for the more complex tasks which the consolidation and expansion of empire came increasingly to impose on even that lowest level of the bureaucracy where alone the natives could find employment. Nor did a mere word-book knowledge of English help the latter to assimilate the values and ideas of British liberalism well enough to justify any claim by the rulers that their rule was based on consent rather than on force. In other words, the imperatives of both power and culture required that English, as a linguistic form, should outgrow signality and function as a truly dynamic system of signs in its role of a medium of instruction. For ‘the ideal of mastering a language is absorption of signality by pure semioticity and of recognition by pure understanding.’³⁰

Under the conditions of colonial rule still in its formative phase, any progress from signality to semioticity in the use of English for Indian education was bound to have the most momentous political consequences. It was to forge that language at once into a hegemonic instrument wielded in order to persuade the subject population about the desirability of its own subjection. Education would unfold, therefore, as an ideological campaign with English assigned, in a variety of discursive forms, the task of committing the colonized to the notion of colonialism as a historically necessary and beneficial development. The importance of the Hindu College in this campaign is too well-known to require elaboration. It was here that a systematic attempt was made for the first time, at an institutional level, to put ‘the ideal of mastering a language’ by teaching based on literary texts rather than word-books, on lessons in grammar rather than spelling, on writing rather than memorizing. The aim of education at that college was, according to the *Calcutta Gazette*, ‘to teach [the] Bengalee youth to read and relish English literature;

to store their minds with the facts of history and science, and to enable them to express just conclusions in a clear and polished style, founded upon a comprehensive view of the constitution of society and the phenomena of nature.'³¹ But the actual achievement of this programme greatly exceeded such curricular efforts. For, in addition to training the minds of the native youths, it also benefited them spiritually, according to the authorities, by 'enlarging the sphere of their understanding, and freeing them from the spell of prejudice, which [had] so long bound them to their primeval notions and customs.'³² In short, education, mediated by English, deposited western values into the soul of the educated.

Its cumulative effect was to be described by Bankimchandra as nothing short of a chasm that had already, by the penultimate decade of the century, made it impossible for the new generation of the educated and the older generation of traditional scholars to communicate with each other. 'This community of the educated,' he wrote, 'cannot understand the discourses of traditional scholarship, even if these are translated into Bengali. Just as the pandits belonging to the traditional schools (*tols*) find it difficult to understand statements made by Europeans, even when they read these in translation, those who have been educated in the western mode, do not find it easy to grasp what the traditional eastern scholars have said, even when that is available in translation.... The western mode of thinking is so very different from the traditional Indian mode of thinking that the translation of ideas cannot be achieved simply by the translation of one language into another.'³³

Thanks to colonialist education, English had thus become constitutive of thought itself for the educated. It cut them off from their own tradition. By the same token, it also made their own past inaccessible to them as a history. Since the contemporary mode of historicizing the past was essentially an aspect of post-Renaissance European thought made available to Indians only by the English language and 'Anglo-Indian education', they did not know how to think it in any way other than did their rulers.

This was particularly true of the most recent past—the colonial past, for it was there that the texts constructed by the dominant culture were most active in persuading the colonized in favour of an interpretation supportive of colonial rule. Far from promoting any development towards a distinctively Indian historiography of colonial India, anglo-phone education was clearly a vehicle of ideologies that hindered it.

LECTURE TWO

IF the urge for an indigenous historiography did not come from the bonding of education and the language of rulers, could it then be said to have issued from the other kind of bonding, namely, that of education and the indigenous languages? The importance of that connection for the making of the colonial state and its culture was at least as critical and pervasive as was the relation between English rule in the subcontinent and English. Much of what was original about the Raj and distinguished it from the historic outcome of some of the other European adventures of the mercantilist era, may be traced precisely to this connection. For purposes of comparison, one could turn to that well-known instance of European expansion chronicled by Bernal Díaz in his classic account, *The Conquest of New Spain*.³⁴ There, the author writes of the relation between conquest and language in all its lucidity and brutality. The Spaniards, we are told, taught Spanish to some of the natives taken as prisoners and used them as interpreters in their attempt to communicate with the indigenous peoples. The object of such communication was to acquire gold. The pattern was significantly different in the case of the British conquest of Bengal. Here, the Company's mercantile operations required 'investment' of the land revenues in the purchase of piecegoods and a certain amount of raw material of various kinds. Conquest was therefore not content simply with grabbing and moving on to the next raid. It coveted regularity and tenure.

Which showed, among other things, that there had been a sea-change in the character of mercantilism itself since the sixteenth century. It was a measure of that change that instead of having their contact with the conquered mediated by native interpreters, as the Spaniards had it in Mexico, the British chose to deal directly with the subject population by learning their languages. Indeed, in India, unlike in New Spain, a knowledge of the indigenous languages was recognized by the rulers as an essential condition for the maintenance of their rule; and the Fort William College, set up in 1800, was the first historic step they took to harness the Indian languages to the construction of a colonial state apparatus.

Of all the far-reaching consequences of this shotgun wedding of language and colonialism, the one most relevant to our argument here was the development of Bengali prose and the possibility it created for the production of a modern and autonomous Indian historiography. Three of the pandits appointed to assist in teaching the Bengali language at the college were our first historians. Ramram Basu's *Raja Pratapaditya Charitra* (1801), Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaj Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram* (1805) and Mrityunjoy Bidyalankar's *Rajabali* (1808) were the very first books on history to be published in a vernacular under British rule. Written in what was soon to emerge as the standard form of the prose narrative in Bengali, all three works were textual sites of a conflict between archaism and modernism at both the literary and the historiographical levels. Many of the symptoms of that conflict have been diagnosed in terms of the distribution of *tatsama* and *tadbhava* phrases, the relative incidence of Persianism and Sanskritism in the vocabulary, and the peculiarities of collocation, syntax and other grammatical features of these writings.³⁵ Judgments vary about the merits of individual authors and their performances, but there is a general agreement that their imperfections were merely the signs of strain in a language as it was about to enter a formative and critical phase of its career.

Linguistic immaturity in these early works was matched by flaws at the historiographical level too. All three have been found by literary scholars as wanting in authenticity.³⁶ To which one could add a number of other obvious defects to show how these writings failed to measure up to the standards of modern historical discourse in their notion of time and in narrative structure. However, any such assessment must end up in empty abstraction, unless it takes into account the contradictions through which a rationalist historiography had to force its way before establishing itself in the intellectual milieu of a colonial society like that of nineteenth-century India—unless, that is, it recognizes the scars and bruises of that difficult passage in the faulty conception and craftsmanship of these first discourses.

For the history of discursive formations parallels, in this respect, that of social formations. The latter are never immaculate when they make their debut. Elements of all previous social formations continue to invest the latest issue of the series not only as vestiges but as constituents too. Inevitably, therefore, a society is fraught with conflict between the old and the new from the very moment of its inception. That is why no capitalist mode of production has ever triumphed in its original habitat in Europe (the case of American capitalism with its fore-shortened history being an exception in this regard) without encountering, combating, overcoming, and yet in a certain sense, yielding to the resistance of the feudal mode. And there has been no bourgeois culture in the Old World which did not have its taste of victory soured by the attrition of its contest with feudal culture and the need to compromise with it to some extent. What is true of capitalism is true of all other social formations as well. Every one of them has been inadequate to its concept and caught up, one could say after Marx, in the incompleteness of its own development.³⁷ The striving to cope with and make up for such inadequacy and incompleteness, constitutes for each of them, its historic project and the condition of all its dynamics.

Much the same could be said of discursive formations. Those, too, are born of turbulence and operate as tissues of contradiction within the cultures to which they belong. As such, they have it as their function to animate those cultures by an enduring struggle between the old and the new both at the level of expression and that of content. Even a hegemonic discourse like the European novel was subjected to the tensions of that struggle and had its paramountcy modified by accommodation with elements of pre-novelistic forms. Epitome of mimesis and realism, it still fed liberally, in its formative stages, on myth and romance as material for its plots.³⁸ Child of the age of printing, it continued for a long time to use narrative strategies derived from what Walter J. Ong has described as 'the old oral narrator's world'.³⁹

The Bengali novel, too, borrowed freely from traditional pre-novelistic forms in its early stages. The impact of Bankimchandra's pioneering contribution to this genre was so comprehensive and so dramatic that many of his contemporaries regarded the publication of his first novel, in 1865, as a complete break with our literary past. 'We shall never forget that day,' wrote Sivnath Shastri as one of them. 'Never before had there been a novel of that kind written in the Bengali language. We had been, until then, avid readers of *Bijay Basanta*, *Kamini Kumar* and a few other old-style novellas modelled on the [Sanskrit romance] *Kadamvari*, and of some short stories called *Hamsarupi Rajputra*, *Chakmokit Baksho*, etc. published by the Garhasthya Pustak Prachar Sabha, supplemented by a few exotic tales such as *Arabya Upanyas*. Of all these, it was only *Alaler Gharer Dulal* which had any claim at all to novelty. However, what we found in *Durgeshnandini* was altogether unprecedented.'⁴⁰ Rabindranath Tagore himself corroborated this testimony when he too mentioned *Bijay Basanta*, *Golebkaoli* and such other 'stories meant for the distraction of children' (*chhele-bhulano katha*) as that 'darkness', which ended with the advent of the *Bangadarshan*, where Bankimchandra serialized some of his novels.⁴¹

However, even after such tribute has been paid, as is entirely due to that historic watershed for which these novels stand in our literary culture, it will still be true to say that their break with the past was, in some significant ways, rather less radical than the observations cited above would imply. For there is a good deal of evidence in these works to show how the author drew freely on narratological and rhetorical conventions of pre-novelistic discourse—on the conventions of classical Sanskrit drama and epic poetry for some of his descriptions of nature; on those of Baishnab lyrics for the representation of sexuality and eroticism; on those of folk comedy and burlesque for his farcical effects; on those of oral literature like the ballad for direct address to the reader in authorial voice; on those of Hindu mythology for prophecies and other forms of providential intervention as elements of narrative action, and so on. To notice these traces of traditionalism and archaism in the works of our first modern novelist is not to undermine his achievement, but indeed to enhance it. For it is only by identifying such relics and their constitutive effects that we can appreciate the heroism of the struggle to establish the novel as a genre in a culture which had no linguistic, narratological or ideological preparation for it at all.

The first three Bengali works on history preceded the first Bengali novel by nearly sixty years. When they were written, there was even less in the conditions of our culture to support a rationalist historiography than the little that was there to assist in the rise of the novel later on in the century. Consequently, the linguistic, narratological and ideological obstacles to historicization were even greater than those to (what Bakhtin has called) 'novelization'. The deficiencies of these early historical discourses were all, in varying degrees, symptomatic of their encounter with such obstacles and its still indecisive outcome. It might be correct, in a formal sense, to use these deficiencies as a measure of their failure to match the standards of the

rationalist historiography of contemporary Western Europe or those of Indian historiography of a later date. But what purpose would that serve except to reiterate the obvious? It would, in any case, do little to help our understanding of these texts as the site of a contest between very different, indeed mutually antagonistic ways of interpreting the past. For all that flaws these works as historical discourse is evidence of the ongoing and unresolved character of that contest.

Nowhere are these shortcomings more pronounced than in *Rajabali*, if only because it is more comprehensive in its scope than the other two works. Mrityunjay looks at the past as one long, aggregative story of princely lives. It begins with a notice on the installation of the first Indian king Ikshwaku by God himself at some point of time during the Satyayug, surveys that and the next two *yugs* in two short paragraphs, and concentrates, for the rest of the work, on the Kaliyug and its rulers, commencing with the reign of Yudhisthir and ending with the regime of the Company Bahadur, installed, again, by God himself some fifty years ago. The very first attempt, made in the Bengali language, to span all of the northern Indian past in a single discourse, it is a vast compendium of whatever information the author had of Hindu and Muslim princes, their wars, adventures and alliances, their pomp and grandeur, their liberality and cruelty, their good deeds and bad deeds, and so on. The serially arranged dynastic accounts in which these details are deposited higgledy-piggledy, do not rely, in all instances, on rigorously tested evidence, but draw indiscriminately on myths and unverified local legends and folklore. The result has been to compromise the text by too easy a traffic between the secular and the supernatural, between fact and fancy. It will not qualify as an entirely authentic work of history.

However, it is a matter of some significance that a vernacular account of the Indian past, published in 1808, should lend itself to be questioned at all on the ground of evidence and authenticity. It indicates that all was not well with the hallowed and hoary sense of the past which

had been reproducing itself in Puranic discourse for a thousand years or so until as recently as the eighteenth century. A youthful pretender, contemporary with the author himself, was keen on taking over memory's old estate and knocking at the gate. History had declared war on tradition. Yet, it was clear that the struggle, which had thus been engaged, was by no means concluded. In the first decade of the nineteenth century and for some time to come, every historical discourse was still to bear the marks of resistance from tradition. No wonder, therefore, that mythic genealogies, sacred geographies, divine interventions, and such other chunks of Puranic material clung resolutely to the text of *Rajabali*. But even there, the narrative managed to shake off much of the incubus as it progressed from the remote to the proximate past, as if to suggest that the balance was tilted inexorably in favour of history and the latter would overcome. Henceforth, there would be no going back to *Purana*.

In saying this we take our cue from Bakhtin's observations on the role of the novel as a solvent of epic time. That role was paralleled in our culture by historiography in its relation to Puranic time. 'The epic', wrote Bakhtin, with reference to the European genre of that name, 'has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendant.'⁴² With the phrase 'epic' replaced by 'Purana', this could pass for a precise description of the latter as that generic discourse by which our own culture had, since antiquity, constructed and cyclically reproduced the past as a sacred and ancestral time, distantiated altogether from the times and values of its authors. This was an 'absolute past', and lacked 'any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present,' and especially, that present where the authors and their audiences belonged.⁴³ In Europe, the emergence of the novel was, according to Bakhtin, the

signal of 'an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man,' precisely because it had the present 'taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation.' It was the intrusion of the present which desacralized and finally destroyed the absolute past of the epic by putting it in direct contact with reality and experience.⁴⁴

In our culture, the demolition of the absolute past of the Purana began with historicization rather than with novelization. The first three historical works in Bengali are all witness to that beginning. Although interlarded with Puranic elements, they all have the present as their point of departure. This is documented, to some extent at least, in a letter written by William Carey soon after his appointment as head of the Bengali department of Fort William College. 'When the appointment was made,' says Carey, 'I saw that I had a very important charge committed to me, and no books or helps of any kind to assist me. I therefore set about compiling a grammar, which is now half printed. I got Ram Boshu to compose a history of one of their kings, the first prose book ever written in the Bengali language; which we are also printing.'⁴⁵ Thus, the first prose narrative about the past to be written by a Bengali in his own language was commissioned as an unmistakably secular work and designed to serve the purely secular purpose of teaching the Company's servants how to put that language to official use. The Englishman who commissioned it defined its epistemic character as history and its function as an administrative teaching manual. The author, on his part, responded to that assignment as a writer addressing the past from his situation within his own world and his own age. As such, he set out consciously to produce a history rather than yet another Puranic tale. This emerges so clearly from the rectilinear structure of his narrative and the discrimination shown in his handling of evidence that the occasional indulgence in myth notwithstanding, the character of the work as rationalist historiography is recognized by modern scholarship.⁴⁶

It would be wrong, however, to overestimate the con-

trol these pandits had over the mythic drift of their narratives. The struggle for historicization was to continue for a while yet. In Mrityunjay Bidyalankar's work this is fought out as a contest between historical time and Puranic time.⁴⁷ The latter is invoked at the very beginning of the text together with elements of Hindu cosmology and a sacred geography to provide what is apparently regarded by the author as an indispensable background for the mundane chronicle of the kings of Bharatvarsha which is, of course, only one of the nine Varshas of Jambudvip, which is itself only one of the Seven Islands which, taken together with the Seven Seas, constitute the world.⁴⁸ Time is reckoned in that world according to its division made, we are told, by Parameshwar, the Supreme Being himself, into Kalpa, Manu, Yug and Batsar, with 432,000 Batsars adding up to a Yug, 284 Yugs to a Manu, 14 Manus to a Kalpa, and 30 Kalpas to the totality of all time. Within that temporal scheme our own time belongs to the Yug called Kali, which is the hundred-and-twelfth Yug of the seventh Manu called Baibasvat, which is a component of the Kalpa of the White Boar (Svetabaraha Kalpa).

Heady stuff, and one starts wondering what history has to do with all this. However, a second glance at this mind-blowing arithmetic makes it obvious that preoccupation with such divinely ordained temporality has not prevented the author from situating himself and his discourse at a determinate point of worldly time identified as the year 1726 of the Saka Era or 1805 Anno Domini. That is his own time, a benchmark of the present from which he speaks. But how is it possible, the reader may ask, to situate oneself at a determinate point of worldly time within so meticulously constructed an aeonic space? The answer clearly is that this cannot be done without running into an irresolvable contradiction like the one implied by Bidyalankar's horological metaphor when he refers to the movement of the wheel of time (*kalachakra*) made up of the thirty Kalpas as a clockwork (*ghatiyantrer nyay*).⁴⁹ To introduce clockwork into the mythic time of the Kalpas is to dissolve its cyclicity in linear, natural time, just as

to introduce the authorial present in a discourse is to free it from thralldom to Puranic time and transpose it to historical time. It is the introjection of that 'now' of the writer and the writing which historicizes the text of *Rajabali* and saves it from being swamped by the plethora of mythic matter deposited there by a sense of the past still partially bound to tradition.

The movement inaugurated thus by the first three historical works in Bengali prose to demythologize the Indian past, continued to gather momentum over the decades. An unexpected consequence which outweighed, in importance, the stimulus that had originated from Carey's need to have manuals written for the training of civilians, it was helped on its way by a number of factors such as the adoption of Bengali as an official medium of public instruction, the growing demand for and production of history text-books in that language, the multiplier effects of a liberal education in increasing the appetite for historical literature and of Orientalism in enhancing the value of the indigenous past, and generally, a new-found faith in the creativity of *matribhasha* (mother-language). Thanks to this and more, not all of which we have the time to consider in these lectures, an indigenous, rationalist historiography matured to the point when, by the middle of the century, it felt strong enough to make decisive inroads into the Puranic past.

Let us take Nilmani Basak's *Nabanari*, published in 1852, as an instance of that development. This work is, in many respects, more representative of the author's skill as a modern historian and of the state of contemporary historiography than the three volumes of *Bharatvarsher Itihas*, for which he is better known. *Nabanari*, literally, *Nine Women*, is, as the sub-title of the book indicates, a collection of 'biographical studies of nine ancient and modern women'.⁵⁰ Such a characterization of the work need not detract from its standing as a genuinely historical discourse. It is, in that respect, an altogether different kind of exercise from Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's *Charitabali*, a difference which it is easy to overlook in view of the

latter's association with this writing as acknowledged by the author himself in a prefatory note. With Vidyasagar, the *charit*, as a genre, operates at the level of morality—social morality, to be precise. That genre does not *require* any development in time. All it is concerned with is to make a point about a particular set of moral principles as illustrated, positively or negatively, by an individual's action or experience. It is thus a genre which is synchronic in its concept. By contrast, *jibancharit*, as we find it in Nilmani Basak's work (and indeed in Vidyasagar's own series of that name published in 1849), derives its form and movement from the *development* of an individual's life within a concrete social and cultural context. Diachronic in concept, it is essentially a genre that has its place within historiography. Indeed, the correspondence between the historical form and the biographical form in the Bengali prose narrative replicates so closely an analogous relationship within the European literary tradition that it must be recognized as yet another instance of a new orientation in our culture brought about by the union of the indigenous languages and the rationalist historiography of the West.

What makes Basak's work particularly significant for us is that seven out of the nine women whose lives are discussed here are figures lifted directly out of Hindu mythology.⁵¹ But he sets out resolutely to treat them as if they were no less real than the two historical personages on his list. The evidential value of the Puranic lives is, for him, as good as that of the historical ones. They refute, he says in his preface, the baseless notion many foreigners have about India as wanting altogether in learned and talented women in the past. By valorizing the mythic lives on a par with the real lives, he thus abolishes, at one stroke, the distinction between mythic past and real past, and provides for myth the condition it needs for swamping history in his narrative. However, what his studies of the seven Puranic lives end up doing is the very opposite: they historicize the myths. This is achieved by the use of rhetorical and narrative devices to create

such secular, rationalist effects in the text as would make the historicity of its contents obvious to the reader.

To start with, he desacralizes the mythic lives by the stratagem of adopting them as biographical themes. 'It has not been customary in this country,' he observes, 'to write any biographies.'⁵² Indeed, the sanctity of myth is safe only so long as it is contained in customary discourse. To plunder mythic material for biography is therefore to violate custom and secularize myth at the same time. The secularist design is made all the more explicit by the author's claim to have compressed all of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata respectively into his essays on Sita and Draupadi 'in order to make this book pleasurable reading'. There is no definition of pleasure by which the story of these two lives, as given in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, can be said to make for 'pleasurable reading'. Spiritually elevating, morally enriching reading?—yes; but, 'pleasurable'?—no. Trapped in sacred texts, Sita and Draupadi stood for ideals whose function was to edify. To be entertaining, they had first to be taken out of their Puranic mould and humanized. This was done, in popular culture, by art, operating, for the most part, at a preliterate level. By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the novel still in an incipient stage, it was up to the relatively mature historical-biographical discourse to do that for an increasingly literate and educated culture constituted by a readership. Basak makes his humanizing and secularizing intention quite obvious when he says, 'There is hardly any literature to inform us when the women, whose biographies are given in this book, were born and how many years they lived. Consequently, reference to birth-date and age has been left out of this writing.' An apology of this kind would have been quite irrelevant had the object of the writing not been regarded as historical personalities; for the biographical details said to be wanting are not required for the construction of mythic lives, nor indeed is it necessary to support such construction by reference to any authoritative literature. The writer is quite clearly eager to demonstrate that he has taken

care to subject his work to the kind of tests which are required by rationalist historiography, even if his material is entirely Puranic. The rationalist character of the exercise is further emphasized by his claim to have based it on research (*anusandhan*) and compilation of data (*samkalan*), neither of which is essential for the recycling of an absolute past that is simply given and inherited.

The narration itself also testifies to a historicizing strategy at work. Take, for example, the study of Sita, based, as Basak says, on the Ramayana. However, the cyclical time of that text has been recast by him into a linear discourse, situated, like a novel, in homogeneous time. An exercise in pure diachrony, it dispenses with the procedure, adopted in the original, to use a mythic past as aid to contextualizing the present. By contrast, the past works in this biography as an aspect of secular subplots which run on parallel lines to the main story and are inserted into the latter, from time to time, by analeptic operators such as 'at that time' (*oi samaye*), 'at this time' (*ei samaye*), 'in the meantime' (*e dike*), and so on. The convergences brought about in this manner help to structure the narrative as a series of ordered episodes joined sequentially by diachronic markers like *anantar*, *tadanantar*, *kiyatkalantar*, *kiyatkal pare* and other phrases (more or less) synonymous with 'thereafter' in English. It is by such devices that the author recuperates the past from mythology to invest it in historiography. But for a reference to Sita's miraculous birth in the very first paragraph of the essay—a nod in the direction of mythology without which the story could not be told at all—and for which, in any case, he shrugs off responsibility by attributing it to Valmiki—and the equally indispensable mention of *rakshasas* and *vanaras*, there is nothing in this biography that makes it different, in structure, from the studies on Ahalyabai and Rani Bhabani, the two historical personages on his list of illustrious lives. Thus, a rationalist discourse which enables linearity to replace cyclicality and the secular the sacred even in traditional narratives, celebrates in Nilmani Basak's *Nabanari* the coming of age of a

modern historiography in the Bengali language. It was a decisive victory in that struggle to free the Indian past from the coils of epic time, which had begun with the works of the pandits of Fort William College some fifty years ago.

The maturation of historiography coincided with that of the Bengali language as well. A belief had begun to gain ground that if the latter could lend itself to creative use for something so complex and so radical in its break with tradition as a rationalist representation of the Indian past, it could be trusted to do anything. It would not be long before a comment⁵³ about that language being 'ill adapted for the very stately measure and sonorous cadence of blank verse' was to provoke Michael Madhusudan Dutt to write a poem in four cantoes precisely in blank verse and prove his friend, the doubter, to have grossly underestimated Bengali. *Tilottamasambhav Kavya*, Madhusudan's answer in the course of that famous argument which took place at Belgachia Villa on a summer evening of 1859, has found its place in literary history as an act of faith. Far less known is the fact that, in this respect, poetry had already been anticipated by historiography. For, the publication of Nilmani Basak's three-volume work, *Bharat-varsher Itihas*, in 1857-58, was also an act of faith. Writing it was, for the author, an affirmation of the claim that the Indian past could be represented more *attractively* and more *authentically* by Bengali than by English. The history of India, he remarked in his introduction to that work,⁵⁴ was written up mostly in English. The few books in Bengali to deal with history were 'merely translations from English' and lacked so completely in aesthetic quality (*nirash*) that no one read them or felt satisfied even if he did so. As for the English works, these were, according to him, both prejudiced and ill-informed about the Hindu past. Students who read them at school were made to believe that 'the religions and customs of this country were all based on falsehood and the ancient

Hindus were a very stupid lot.' It was 'to remedy these defects,' he said, that he had undertaken to write *Bharat-varsher Itihas* in Bengali.

The critique of the inadequacy of anglophone historiography and the author's resolve to overcome it by Bengali, were both obviously premised on the belief that there was a special relationship between the Indian past and an indigenous language which made of the latter a more competent and sensitive instrument for writing Indian history. For Bengali was, by this time, beginning to be recognized by its educated middle-class speakers as an index of their identity and trusted to represent truthfully that vital dimension of their existence which constituted the Indian past. A language-consciousness was allowed thus to stand in for self-consciousness, so that by the end of the 1840s a sentiment about *matrihasha* had already gelled into an ideology. Such an ideology had of course been prefigured in the conservative resistance to English as purveyor of a liberal culture, and its traces were there, throughout the rest of the century, to mark both the gravity of denunciation by priests and pandits and the levity of folk comment registered, for instance, in Rupchand Pakshi's bilingual verses. But this fear of English as the enemy of tradition was soon exceeded by a positive concern for the prestige and potentialities of the mother language. The point of that concern was not so much to replace English as to make Bengali emulate it.

The initiative for emulation, as for so many other things, came from Rammohun Roy, when by rendering the Vedanta into Bengali he demonstrated how the latter could be made to work for the popularization of Hindu theology just as the missionaries made it work for the propagation of Christianity. However, the obvious, though never explicitly mentioned association of so renowned an Anglicist and liberal did not prevent the idea from being adopted even by some of those intellectuals who, on most other matters, differed with the Raja. As one of them, Ishwar-chandra Gupta campaigned consistently and vigorously for the promotion of Bengali in his *Sambad Prabhakar*. 'The

people of every nation cherish their *national language* and try to learn it well,' he wrote in an editorial in 1848. 'But it is a curious fact that the people of this country pay no attention to national education and devote most of their energies to cultivating the English language. The lack of interest and care on their part has, therefore, barred the progress of the Bengali language.'⁵⁵ Notice the phrase 'national language' (*jatiya bhasha*) in this passage. Throughout the 1850s that phrase was used in this journal interchangeably with *matribhasha* to indicate that the natural language of the Bengali people had already been made into an ideological marker by which the literate part of the population identified all native speakers as constituting a 'nation' and distinguished them from their English-speaking rulers. The colonized would henceforth use their own language consciously and systematically as a defining element of their relationship with the colonizers.

Like all the other elements of that relationship, this too was not without its tensions. It was used, on the one hand, to signal to the rulers the complete acquiescence of the intelligentsia to their rule. The *Prabhakar* was therefore quite consistent when it anticipated the loyalism of its editorial comment on the Mutiny by advocating, for years before that event, the need to improve instruction in the Bengali language on the ground that it would help the colonial government to govern more efficiently and the colonized to propagate better 'the contents of books written in English.'⁵⁶ But the promotion of *matribhasha* for hegemonic use was only one aspect of its deployment as an ideology. The relationship of dominance and subordination to which it was assimilated was also charged with antagonism. For the subordinate language to emulate the dominant was not only to acknowledge the latter's superiority, but also to enter into rivalry with it in an attempt to achieve parity. Concern for and amelioration of the mother language became issues thus in a contest for prestige.

No contest could be more circumspect, but none more important for the development of our literature and his-

toriography. At a time when acquiescence to British rule was parametric to middle-class notions of politics, we have here an instance which it would be wrong to designate as resistance or defiance in any sense that is explicit or otherwise pronounced. A movement, with its springs rooted deeply in that primordial relation which man, as species-being, has with his natural language, it was no more than a reflex action of the will. The passions it inspired and the metaphors of motherhood used to describe it, were all evidence of its rootedness in such a primordial connection. Madhusudan Dutt based himself precisely on that connection in arguing why Bengali was more suitable for blank verse even if French was not. 'The Bengali is born of the Sanskrit than which a more copious and elaborate language does not exist,' he said.⁵⁷ Again, in a famous sonnet, he paid tribute to Bengali as the daughter who excelled in beauty her mother, Sanskrit, born of the gods.⁵⁸ Copious, elaborate, beautiful, divine—words of high praise such as these were a measure of the distance in time and values from those of Rammohan Roy who had thought it fit to emphasize the poverty of the Bengali language before proceeding with advice to his readers about how to cope with the prose of his *Vedanta Grantha*.⁵⁹ That was in 1815. By contrast, there was nothing defensive at all in the claim Shyamacharan Sarma Sarkar made for the language when he wrote in 1850: 'The Bengali is a truly noble language even in its present state, able to convey almost any idea with precision, force and elegance. Words may be compounded with such facility, and to so great an extent that any scientific or technical term of any language may be rendered by an exact equivalent—an advantage which, amongst the dead and living languages of Europe, is possessed by the Greek and German.'⁶⁰ It was such confidence in the existing strength and further potentialities of the language that induced Madhusudan to emulate Milton in poetry and Nilmani Basak to try and surpass all of anglophone writing in Indian historiography. For a people who, during the middle decades of the century, were forcefully and insis-

tently reminded of their subjection, the triumph, even an imaginary triumph, of *matribhasha* over European languages, was no mean compensation for a battered self-respect.

It would be unfair, however, to think of this faith merely as the product of an imagination in ferment. For it was inspired, to no small extent, by an assessment of the limitations and possibilities of the language as demonstrated in practice. Such an assessment had been, for modern Bengali, especially in its prose form, a part of the process of its growing up. Its dialogic situation that forced it constantly to enter into exchanges with English put its strengths and weaknesses to test in every transaction wherever it took place—on the page of an administrative document, in literary writing, in school manuals, at mercantile offices in conversations between *sahibs* and *babus*, and any number of such encounters. Every semantic slide that occurred in such exchanges was evidence not only of what Bengali could not do, but also of what it could. For every difference which, in any instance, survived the most exacting attempt at translation, was an index of the originality of the language: it revealed a property of the mother language for which no other language had an equivalent to offer. That originality could, of course, be put to genuinely creative use only in autonomous exercises where the compulsion to fit the language to a foreign text or to a foreigner's want of aptitude for it did not constrain the freedom it required to generate sentences according to the full measure of its competence.

It was precisely a constraint of this kind to which Nilmani Basak objected when he spoke of translations from anglophone works in history as aesthetically inadequate and unreadable. He could have made the point equally well by addressing his critique to the inadequacies of historical works written by foreigners in Bengali. For these showed clearly how that language could never come to its own unless used by native speakers. The point could have been easily made by reference to some of the familiar instances of early nineteenth-century historiography—to, say, J. C. Marshman's influential and widely-read

Bharatvarsher Itihas, published in two volumes in 1831. Sushil Kumar De has cited an extract from this work as a sample of what he calls the 'pervading uniformity and general sameness' of European writing in Bengali at this time.⁶¹ The extract is a description of the battle of Plassey, and it is indeed illuminating, as De suggests, to compare it with an account of the same event in Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaj Krishnachandra Rayasya Charithram*.⁶²

Of the two, Marshman's is the more straightforward reporting of the event with one sentence devoted to mobilisation of the rival armies, two to their respective strengths in men and arms, and three to the actual battle and its conclusion in British victory as a result of Mir Jafar's treachery. All this is written in a terse, matter-of-fact manner intended to distance the author from the event and attest thereby to the objectivity of his report. The only comment that is his own comes at the very end, where he says how this relatively minor battle in which the total number of casualties was only seventy-two, taking both the sides together, had the consequence of changing the destinies of sixty million people in a vast kingdom. It is a comment that also stands for a closure and affirms thereby the narrative's claim to historicity.⁶³

By contrast, Rajiblochan's account does not appear to be excessively concerned with the appearance of objectivity or narrative closure. It concludes with the statement that 'Thereafter the Nawab's troops stopped fighting and took to flight, and the English were victorious'—an episodic ending that has no pretension to being anything more decisive than what could be a pause before the beginning of another tale. This agrees with the anecdotal mode of story-telling—the mode of the Indian *akhyayika*—according to a plot that opposes Mohanlal's loyalty to Mir Jafar's betrayal. Thanks to such a plot, the event assumes the character of a drama in which the passions of its protagonists and the uncertainties of the battle are brought together to make for an experience that resists being pressed flat into a reportage like the one in Marshman's

work. There can be little doubt that with all its naive, chatty and episodic air, this narrative impresses the reader as the more attractive of the two accounts of the battle, if only because it does not represent the event simply as a deployment of armies and its outcome, but as a tissue of conflicting choices objectified in the violence of a struggle for power.

The difference between these two representations shows that a historian's relation to the language he uses to write about the past has a bearing on how he writes about it. One could perhaps say with a little help from a Chomskyan notion, that compared to the European scholar who had acquired proficiency in Bengali by learning, the native speaker who had internalized its 'generative grammar' had an initial advantage in putting to creative use its system of rules 'in new and untried combinations to new sentences.'⁶⁴ But that initial advantage, born of competence, that is, his intuitive 'ability to associate sounds and meanings strictly in accordance with the rules of his language,'⁶⁵ would not, taken by itself, explain the superiority of the indigenous account. For actual linguistic performance involves, according to Chomsky, 'a variety of factors of which the underlying competence of the speaker-hearer is only one.'⁶⁶ However, the difference made by such 'a variety of factors' can only be to ensure that the foreigner takes second place to the native speaker in performance as well, if only because the latter, speaking as he does from his situation within his own society, has a far greater access to and control over those factors related to extralinguistic beliefs, cognitive structures, etc. 'that interact with underlying competence to determine actual performance.'⁶⁷ One can understand, therefore, why Rajiblochan succeeded in making his *matribhasha* do more work for him than Marshman managed to get out of his second language, although both had the same event to write about and nearly the same information to write it up with. It was from his European rulers that the Bengali intellectual learnt to rethink his own past according to a post-Enlightenment, rationalist view of history. It was to

the impact of British rule again that he owed the beginnings of a modern Bengali prose. However, once the sense of prose came together in indigenous narrative practice, the outcome was a historiography which promised at once to make for a far more sensitive reading of the Indian past than any European writing in Bengali on the same subject.



LECTURE THREE

IT was thus that the development of modern Bengali prose provided, from its very beginning in the first decade of the nineteenth century, a necessary condition for the making of an autonomous view of the Indian past. But the promise of autonomy had not materialized even as late as 1880 when that failure seemed to Bankimchandra obvious enough to merit his call for an Indian historiography of India. Quite clearly, the autonomy of historiography was not only a question of language. It was also a question of power. Since the Indian past had already been appropriated by colonialist discourse for reasons of state, its reclamation could only be achieved by expropriating the expropriators.

Appropriation is an exercise in proprietorship. One can say, adapting some of Hegel's thoughts on property, that to appropriate is to put one's will into a thing and then objectify such willing by occupancy and use.⁶⁸ To appropriate a past is, therefore, to make time, dead time, into a thing before grasping it by one's will. That is, of course no problem for the bourgeoisie, who constitute themselves into a class precisely by turning time into that ultimate and most generalized form of the thing, money—the thing which, under the rule of that class, becomes the measure and symbol of all other things. Nor is the prospect of having to do with dead time any deterrent to bourgeois appropriation of the past. For 'capital is dead

labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour,⁶⁹ that is, by making surplus labour-time of the past congealed in its constant part absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour-time actually present at any point of a process of production in the form of surplus labour. That is why the objectification of the past as a thing to seize and possess comes as easily to the capitalist in the sphere of culture as in that of commodity production. And where, in the nineteenth century, was dead time easier for masters of capital to come by than in the continents of frozen time made up of the so-called archaic societies?

It was quite in order, therefore, that the bourgeoisie who came from the West to rule over South Asia, the most grasping of all the bourgeoisie of that period, should have the will to appropriate the Indian past, and realize that will objectively by conquest and use: conquest—to make the act of will recognizable by others, because without such recognition the will remains trapped in its concept;⁷⁰ and use—in order to convert dominance, acquired by conquest, into hegemony. But, says Hegel, 'The use of the thing is my need being externally realized through the change, destruction, and consumption of the thing.'⁷¹ Change, destruction, consumption: the purpose of these moments of use is to ensure that 'the thing is reduced to a means of the satisfaction of my need.'⁷² It was to satisfy Britain's imperial need to get its conquest and dominion recognized as the triumph of a historic will and realization of a historic destiny that the Indian past was appropriated and used for the construction of British Indian history. However, it is not possible to appropriate a people's past without imposing the appropriator's will on their will, without ousting them from the site of an autochthonous occupancy, without violating the traditions of a pre-existing right of use. In other words, appropriation of another people's past amounts to expropriation. Nilmani Basak's grievance about the falsification of the Indian past in anglophone historiography indicated how the 'change, destruction and consumption' brought about by

the violence of colonialist appropriation did not fail to register on the sensitivities of the expropriated.

It was only by hardening such sensitivity into resistance that the expropriators could be expropriated. That would mean, of course, questioning Britain's right to appropriate our past, its right to annex Indian history as 'a portion of the British history,' according to Mill's formula. But that right, as the more vigorous amongst the ideologues of the Raj never failed to remind the subject people, followed from the right of dominion acquired by conquest. To assert the autonomy of Indian historiography amounted, therefore, to challenging that right—Britain's right to rule India. In other words, *no historiography of colonial India would be truly Indian except as a critique of the very fundamentals of the constitutive power relationship of colonialism itself*. If with all the help it had from a maturing Bengali prose, historiography in that language still continued to be tied to the colonialist model, it was because of its failure to develop a critique of colonialism in any *fundamental* sense.

Conformity to that model was characteristic of both the principal varieties of indigenous writing on the history of British rule. One of these was made up of manuals used for teaching at schools. It is not possible to exaggerate their importance as the means of propagating a rationalist view of the past among the youth. It was these text-books which, more than anything else, helped history to establish itself as a moral knowledge—normal in a Kuhnian sense—within a culture still largely anchored to the Puranic tradition. But the narrative, in all of these, adhered scrupulously to a standard schema according to which Indian history, since 1757, was simply a record of governor-generalships made up, for the most part, of two kinds of facts—namely, geopolitical events relating to wars and alliances by which the British incorporated various parts of the subcontinent into a growing empire, and administrative measures by which that empire was made

secure and governable. Turn, for instance, to such popular manuals as Krishna Chandra Ray's *Bharatvarsher Itihas: Ingrejdiger Adhikarkal*—the author was a student of E. B. Cowell and a member of Ishwarchandra Gupta's literary circle, or to Kantichandra Rarhi's *Bharatvarshe Ingraj Rajatwer Samkshipta Itihas* or to Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay's *Pratham Siksha Bangalar Itihas*, praised by Bankimchandra as invaluable though short—'a fistful of gold' he called it—and you can see the uniformity of the pattern in which chapter headings inscribed with the names of governors, wars and legislations follow one another from Clive to Dalhousie, from the conquest of Bengal to the annexation of Nagpur, from Pitt's India Act to the India Bill of 1853.⁷³ The pattern, originally designed by Mill for his *History* and adopted by most British authors in text-books written for use in the sub-continent, was evidence of the resoluteness with which the conquerors had taken over the Indian past since Plassey and stuffed it with the grandeur of their own dominance as its principal content. The colonized could not be more completely expropriated. By conforming to that pattern, Indian historiography merely acquiesced to such expropriation.

That acquiescence might have been produced under duress to some extent. For the standard narrative structure of the manuals was perhaps officially induced and authors could expect no governmental approval for them unless they conformed. They had to be careful, said Tagore, not to overstep the boundaries marked out for them according to the canon of loyalism and the wisdom of text-book societies.⁷⁴ No such consideration applied, however, to the second variety of Bengali historical literature, and yet, that too was equally conspicuous by its silence on the fundamental question of power—the question of Britain's right to rule India. Strictly speaking, it was as complicit to British rule as was the other kind. Unlike the latter, it was not addressed primarily to school children, but to adult readership. The craft and literary quality which distinguished it, in its most accomplished

form, put it on a par with the best of contemporary Indian histories written in English. It combined description with reflection according to the mode of modern European historiography, and had more use for criticism than did the manuals. But the limits which such criticism imposed on itself were a true measure of its failure to develop into a critique of colonialism in a fundamental sense.

Failure in this respect was exemplified even in the best specimens of the genre, such as Rajanikanta Gupta's *Sipahi Juddher Itihas* (1880; Bengali Year 1286) and Akshaykumar Maitreya's *Sirajuddowla* (1898; Bengali Year 1304).⁷⁵ Each of these was recognized by contemporaries for its historiographical skill and erudition—the first by Romesh Chunder Dutt and the second by Rabindranath Tagore, among others.⁷⁶ Each was commended as an exercise in fearless criticism. Maitreya's book marked, for Rabindranath, 'the inauguration of an age of freedom in Bengali historiography', while Ramendrasundar Tribedi saw in Gupta's work the first signs of an 'independent critical attitude' towards British historians of India.⁷⁷ Much of this praise was deserved. There was, indeed, an attempt made in both of these to break away from the habit, developed by indigenous authors almost into a convention, of recycling the chauvinistic, racist and factually unsubstantiated rubbish produced by a good deal of Anglo-Indian writing in the form of histories, dissertations, diaries, reminiscences, etc. By confronting these critically on the ground of evidence and the no less important ground of sentiment, Gupta and Maitreya turned indigenous historiography towards a genuinely healthy, sceptical direction.

Healthy, though not so original as the encomium seemed to imply. For the questioning and refutation of certain kinds of British writing on the Mutiny and on Sirajuddowla relied, in both these works, on an empirical-critical tradition well established within British historiography itself. Its presence was conspicuous in the growing volume of dissent that had, since the 1860s, opposed the official and patriotic non-official accounts of the Mutiny, as well as in the indictment of the East India Company's

early transactions that had increasingly gained in authority during the hundred years between Burke's speech at the trial of Warren Hastings and Beveridge's articles on Hastings serialized in the *Calcutta Review* in 1877-86. Quite a few of the references in Gupta's and Maitreya's books make it obvious that they owed to these sources much of their information, and indeed, not a little of what has been called their courage. Tribedi lauded Gupta's work as 'an act of daring'. But in spite of the irritation that such a work might have caused in some official circles, it did not take a lot of daring to say, even in 1880, what had been openly and elaborately argued by English writers themselves during the past two decades.

More to the point than either originality or courage was the symbolic value of these works as an assertion of self-respect. Or, to put the same thing in another way, the originality and courage attributed to these authors consisted not in what they said—for what they said was derivative—but in their saying it. As Rabindranath observed, not without bitterness, in a review of Maitreya's monograph,

The English are hardly aware that the innumerable abuses addressed to the Oriental character and Oriental principles of government briefly or elaborately, vaguely or explicitly, relevantly or irrelevantly, in books written in the English language, generate a grievance, born of a sense of humiliation, in the minds of the educated Indian readers.

Yet during the first phase of our education, we used to revere the works of English authors as sacred texts on a par with the Vedas. However much they hurt, we could not bring ourselves to believe that it was possible for us to dissent, that it was within our means to verify their contents by the use of evidence and criticism. We felt obliged to bow down to such insult in mute self-deprecation and regard it as the very truth about ourselves.

If under such circumstances, an able, skilful and powerful writer of our country succeeds in breaking our mental bonds and sets an example in freeing us from blind imitation, he deserves the gratitude of our people.⁷⁸

In spite of some reservations, Rabindranath welcomed the book as a blow struck for self-respect, and Tribedi,

too, expressed his appreciation of the other work for exactly the same reason. But the self-respect at issue here was the self-respect of a subject people reconciled to its subjection. Its loss was not ascribed to want of political independence, but to want of recognition within the framework of colonial dependence. The fight for prestige engaged in these works was one to clear our name as a people by disproving all the aspirations cast on the character of our princes, peasants, sepoys—in general, on us in our collective designation as a nation. In other words, it was prestige coveted by the servant in the form of recognition from the master. If this was a blow for self-respect, the self concerned was one that had not learnt to reach out for mastery.

That was why the urge for self-respect did nothing to mark or modify the abject, abundant and explicit loyalism of these texts. Loyalist assumptions and loyalist professions were so well integrated in their argument that the necessity of colonialism features in both as an unquestioned and unquestionable presupposition. That is why, after demonstrating to his and the reader's satisfaction that the destruction of Sirajuddowla and his kingdom was brought about by chicanery, deceit and venality on the part of Clive and the Company, and by intrigue and treachery on the part of their native collaborators, Maitreya found it fit to conclude thus: 'In view of the happiness and peace which characterize the new conditions of life in contemporary India, it must be admitted that... poison has produced ambrosia and a new India has been brought to life—an auspicious outcome which could have hardly been possible without the help of the English merchants!'⁷⁹ And this image of a new India was consistent with his view of its power structure, as he wrote: 'England is for our good, and we are for England's glory. We, the two great nations, stand together under the protection of a single monarchy; we share each other's weal and woe; arm in arm, we have stepped into a glorious new age! Let this companionship in arms grow stronger, let this eternal friendship contribute to our mutual happiness, etc. !...'⁸⁰

The fate of Sirajuddowla was largely a matter of academic interest when Maitreya wrote about it in 1898. By contrast, the memory of the Mutiny was still fresh in people's minds and within the administration when Gupta came out with his history. At that point, within two decades of that massive clash of arms between the rulers and the ruled, their relationship could hardly be perceived as one of companionship in arms. Gupta had, therefore, little use for 'eternal friendship', and professed, on behalf of his compatriots, an enduring loyalty to Britain—loyalty that triumphed over all British atrocities, insults, innuendoes and plain denunciation of Indians as wanting in the gratitude they owed to their colonial masters. The theme of loyalty was made to weave through most of his narrative as a connecting thread and its importance for his argument was put beyond doubt by the long, concluding section of the very last chapter of his four-volume work. In this section, called 'Bharatbashidiger Rajbhakti' ('Indian Loyalty to the State'), he cited thirteen outstanding instances—these were in addition to those already mentioned in the rest of the book—to illustrate how widespread loyalty to the Raj was among all strata of the population from landlords and princes to soldiers, peasants and nannies.⁸¹ All this was evidence for him of the support the natives gave the British whenever the latter were in trouble. 'In the event,' he wrote, 'the rebellion was limited to sepoys alone.... Indians, as a whole, were not seized by the madness of insurgency. Educated Indians, in particular, had nothing to do with it,'⁸² and he had, of course, a special word of commendation for Bengalis who, he said, 'were never lacking in loyalty.... The Bengalis never allowed anything to blemish their loyalty to the Raj.'⁸³

Gupta's book was published in 1880, the year Bankim chandra came out with his agenda for an Indian historiography in the *Bangadarshan*. Quite clearly, there was little in indigenous historical writings yet to provide

that agenda with its most indispensable condition, namely, a critique of the necessity of colonialism itself. And judging by Maitreya's work, such a critique would not be forthcoming even as late as 1898. Was it this deficiency, the failure of historiography to use the already adequate resources of the language for the construction of an autonomous discourse—was it this that prompted Bankimchandra to formulate his agenda? Did the latter require such a critique as its *sine qua non*, according to him?

It is possible to elicit an answer to this question from a number of his essays written over a period of nearly twenty years on history and historiography. As Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay has observed, they fall roughly into two classes—one concerned primarily with the ethno-cultural origins of the Bengali people, and the other with the refutation of what the author regarded as historical slander (*kalamka*) against Indians in general and Bengalis in particular.⁸⁴ It is the second of these two groups which is more relevant for our present discussion. What was particularly striking about these writings was their polemical and defensive character. The need for an Indian historiography derived, in them, from the need to correct the misrepresentations to which, in Bankimchandra's opinion, the Indian past, and especially the Bengali past, had been subjected by foreign authors. Our past, written up as history by these foreigners, was, according to him, no history at all. For, that past was misappropriated and falsified. It was not our true past, and the discourse which claimed to represent it, was, therefore, not true history. 'In our opinion,' he wrote, 'there is not a single work in English that is a true history (*prakrita itihasa*) of Bengal. . . [What has been written] is not the history of Bengal, not even the merest fragment of it. It has got nothing at all to do with the history of Bengal. There is no history of the Bengali nation in it. A Bengali who accepts this kind of writing as the history of Bengal is not a true Bengali.'⁸⁵

Strong stuff; this reiterative denial of historiographical status to what he called foreign writings on the Bengali

past was the author's way of defining the true past as one for which Bengalis alone could be their own historians. Conversely, a true history of Bengal could only be a representation of their own past by Bengalis themselves. In other words, misrepresentation by foreigners was to be combated and overcome by self-representation. An indigenous historiography was the means of such self-representation. Hence, the urgency of that call: 'There is no history of Bengal. . . There has to be a history of Bengal. . . Who is to write it? . . . Anyone, who is a Bengali, has to write it.'⁸⁶ A call for an autonomous historiography, it insisted on self-representation as the very condition of that autonomy. But the right of self-representation was not for a subject people to claim: it was not supposed to represent itself; it was merely to be represented. To insist on self-representation, even in terms of its past, was, therefore, for such a people, already a signal of its impatience with the state of subjection. Considered thus, the urge for an autonomous historiography could be understood as the symptom that it really was of an urgent, insistent, though incipient nationalism.

It was to be expected, therefore, that the cry, 'We don't have a history. We must have a history!' should echo the other cry, 'We are not yet a nation. We must become a nation.' The reciprocities of lack and desire in one corresponded so directly to those in the other that the energies and ideas invested in the project of historiography were easily assimilated to those invested in the project of nationhood—*jatipratishtha*—a theme of central concern to the author. The foreigner was for each of these projects the Other in terms of which it defined itself negatively. The polemic against *kalamka* was so important for Bankimchandra precisely because it marked the presence of the Other who had appropriated our past and falsified it. Appropriation always leaves its mark on what is appropriated. 'When I grasp a thing or form it,' says Hegel, 'this also means in the last resort that I mark it, and mark it for others, in order to exclude them and show that I have put my will into the thing.'⁸⁷ *Kalamka*,

taken in both its visual sense as stigma and its verbal sense as slander was the mark an alien will had left on the purloined indigeneous past. To remove that stigma was therefore crucial to the struggle for the recovery of that past. Hence the pride of place Bankimchandra assigned to this theme in his articles on history contributed to *Bangadarshan* and *Prachar*. He made it a point to address this question in both of his inaugural essays published in these journals, at an interval of twelve years, as 'Bharat-kalamka' ('India Slandered') in one and 'Bangalar kalamka' ('Bengal Slandered') in the other. As he wrote in the opening paragraph of the latter: 'When *Bangadarshan* was first published, the very first article of its first issue was devoted to the refutation of a long-standing slander on India. That was a ritual to ensure prosperity (*mangalacharan*) for the journal. *Prachar* is now emulating that example by undertaking to refute a long-standing slander about Bengal in the first article of its very first number. God and all the children of Bengal help us.'⁸⁸

We invoke this extract to underscore not only the polemical function of that theme in Bankimchandra's agenda, but also the high seriousness, amounting to a quasi-religious fervour, with which he approached it. He was entirely consistent with himself in doing so. For he had already endowed the past with the sanctity of an ancestral time, as witness some of those key passages,⁸⁹ where *purbamahatmya* (former glory) was assimilated to *amadiger purbapurushdiger gourob* (the glory of our forefathers) and the recovery of the past as history prescribed as a filial duty to redeem the family name. Rhetoric, such as this, was the sign of an ideological operation by which historiography, in its turn, was assimilated to nationalism—a sign, indeed, of the times when sentiments, obligations and notions related to the natural family would be transferred increasingly to a larger, ideal family constructed by political culture as the nation.

Kalamka, the mark of the Other on a past appropriated by foreigners, was the mark of both British and Musalman historians. But between the two, it was the

latter who, according to Bankimchandra, were more to be blamed, because the British relied on them for much of their source material.⁹⁰ Of the strings of uncomplimentary phrases he used for the Musalman writers, two sets were particularly revealing—one of which (viz. *satyabhita* and *mithyabadi*) characterized them as liars, and the other (viz. *paradharmadveshi* and *hindudveshi*) described them as Hindu-haters. The past, falsified by foreign writers, was identified thus as a Hindu past.

In what sense was that past falsified? It was falsified, he argued, by the failure, on the part of European and Musalman historians, to acknowledge the former glory of the Bengali people. Of the two kinds of glory he mentioned in this connection, one was spiritual and intellectual, and his list of unacknowledged achievements in that category included the religious doctrines of Chaitanya, the logic of the Navyanyaya school, the poetry of Jaydeb, Vidyapati, etc.⁹¹ Nilmani Basak, too, had objected to omissions on this particular point in manuals written in English and their translations into Bengali. But the emphasis in Bankimchandra's charge of misrepresentation was on the denial of another kind of glory—the glory of physical prowess, *bahubol*, literally, the strength of arms. He dwelt so obsessively on this aspect of the *kalamka*, so persistent and indeed so passionate was his attempt to disprove it, that the slander, as he called it, appeared primarily to refer to this one imputed weakness. The significance of *bahubol* for his idea of an alternative historiography could therefore be hardly overstated.

Its significance lay, in the first place, in its originality. For this notion clearly set him apart, as a liberal thinker, from many of his distinguished contemporaries. From Nilmani Basak, for instance. The failure of anglophone historiography to acknowledge the intellectual achievements of ancient India was deplored by the latter as well. But his complaint, like that of many others, on this point was not inconsistent with the liberal values propagated by the colonial system of education. Nor was any dissent to British dominance presupposed in it. On the contrary,

Basak's concern in this regard like Bankimchandra's could be considered as a derivative of that liberal-imperialist element of the ruling culture which had, as an effect of Orientalism, taught the Indian intelligentsia to appreciate the wonder that India had been in the past. However, Bankimchandra's sense of loss, unlike Basak's, extended beyond the question of intellectual achievement to that of physical prowess and shifted thereby the complaint about foreigners—and about foreign rule by implication—to a political level where acquiescence to colonialism was only one of two possible choices, the other being antagonism. Whether that other choice was, in the event, made operative at all within the liberal intelligentsia's attitude to colonial rule, hence in historiography, is a question we shall soon take up for discussion. Suffice it to notice, at this point of the argument, that the notion of *bahubol* gave to Bankimchandra's agenda a rather different orientation from that of any other liberal Indian effort, like Basak's, at rewriting our history.

That orientation hinged critically on the function of *bahubol* as a conceptual link between historiography and power. Not an easy link to forge under the best of conditions, it was all the more difficult when, with the Mutiny crushed and most of the wars of annexation fought and won, the Raj, in the last quarter of the century, was more secure than ever in its paramountcy. This was no time for a disarmed subject population to flaunt its strength, past or present. On the contrary, it would be opportune now to slide cosily into introspection and sublimate despair by self-improvement and character-building. A time to propagate *charitrabol* rather than *bahubol*. The former had, of course, its attraction for Bankimchandra, as witness his fabrication of an ideal character in Krishna, and above all, his labours at that school of character-building set up under the sign of Anushilandharma. But inwardness with him, unlike Vidyasagar, was never quite hermetically sealed. It was indeed one of the many paradoxes of those paradox-ridden times that with all its religiosity and other-worldly tendencies, his individualism was, in a sense,

more open to worldly intrusion than the secular, but hard-baked, bourgeois individualism of the illustrious lives packed into his older contemporary's *Jibancharit* and *Charitabali*.

The concept of *bahubol* stood, in Bankimchandra's thought, for that rat-hole which allowed history to flood into what would otherwise have been a banked-up and interiorized nationalism. That concept was, by definition, predicated on an object. Power of arms was power only in the sense and to the extent that it had an object for its exercise. It was in terms of such objectification and the values assigned to it that a historiography of India would henceforth be tested for any claim to autonomy. For such autonomy required a critique of the fundamental power relation of colonialism, that is, a critique of the necessity of colonialism itself, as its indispensable condition. In other words, a historiography of colonial India would qualify as genuinely Indian and autonomous, if and only if it allowed *bahubol* to operate as a decisive element of that critique. This was what made Bankimchandra's agenda so original and so pregnant with possibilities: it problematized historiography at a higher level of politics than had been done so far by any other agenda of liberal historiography, and it armed Indian historiography with a principle that would enable it to expropriate the expropriators by making the Indian people, constituted as a nation, the subject of their own history.

The irony of it all was that having gone as far as he did to formulate the principle, Bankimchandra turned back precisely at the point where he was called upon to practise it by the logic of his own discourse. This can be clearly seen from the manner in which *bahubol* was used in his writings on the theme of *kalamka*. In all the five essays⁹² addressed to it between 'Bharat-kalamka' (1873) and 'Bangalar kalamka' (1885), his defence of ancestral reputation consisted primarily in an effort to prove that the Hindus did not lack in strength of arms. Indeed, his emphasis on this aspect so completely outweighed his incidental references to spiritual achievement—and even

these were absent from the two key articles, the first and the last, of the series—that the slander he had set out to answer appeared entirely to be a matter of aspersions about physical weakness and want of fighting quality. The recovery of past glory meant, therefore, setting the record right for *bahubol* and putting history to work for that end if it was to be a genuine history (*prakrita itihas*)—a national history.

The five essays, taken together, stand for his own contribution to that history. However, the evidence put forward there in support of his case against misrepresentation by foreign authors makes it obvious that the exercise of *bahubol* was, for him, primarily a demonstration of Hindu superiority to Musalmans in fighting strength. *Bahubol*, in the form of wars and armed raids, was invoked, on a rough count, twenty-five times in these essays. Excluding three references to Hindu colonization abroad (Simhal, Java and Bali) and six to Hindus fighting amongst themselves,⁹³ we are left with sixteen citations, only three of which have Europeans as the object of *bahubol* and the rest, that is, thirteen, Musalmans. Since the Hindus figure in each of these instances as the agent of *bahubol*, the latter may be said to have been objectified by Bankimchandra, for the greater part of his argument—for over eighty per cent of it—as a protracted trial of strength by arms between Musalmans and Hindus, with the verdict pronounced decisively in favour of the latter. In so far as that verdict was his contribution to the recovery of a glorious past, there could be no doubt about the Hindu character of that past. And, in so far as that verdict was his answer to defamation of the Indian national character, there could be no doubt about the purely Hindu identity of that nationhood. Any historiography, constructed in these terms, was bound to be inadequate for the agenda formulated by the author himself, if only because the contradiction that governed the deployment of *bahubol* in it, did not have colonialism as one of its terms. There should be nothing in it, therefore, to constitute that critique of colonialism

without which no historiography could be truly autonomous.

Another look at those instances of *bahubol* may help to clarify this point further. Of the sixteen citations which were strictly relevant to Bankimchandra's argument, all but one were about demonstrations of physical prowess in the pre-colonial period. Two out of the three references to Europeans as the object of *bahubol* concerned Alexander's invasion of the Punjab in 327 BC. The solitary case of armed encounter with Europeans in colonial times was taken from the Second Anglo-Sikh War of 1848-49, and although the valour of Sikh resistance at Ramnagar and Chilianwala was promptly assimilated to the record of Hindu glory, the decisive character of British victory did not allow for the nomination of this event as the most convincing instance of *bahubol*.

For all practical purposes, therefore, the importance of *bahubol*, for Bankimchandra, was limited to its exercise in the pre-colonial history of India. By choosing not to extend it into the period of British paramountcy in spite of the large incidence of armed conflict between the Raj and the people with which to illustrate it (the first and the last essays of the *kalamka* series were written respectively within sixteen and twenty-eight years of the Mutiny), he failed to explore the power of that concept to its utmost extent, that is, its power to objectify the principal contradiction of colonialism—the contradiction between colonizer and colonized, as one which could not be resolved except by recourse to arms. Since an objectification of that order was indispensable for the autonomy of historiography, if it were to develop a fundamental critique of colonialism in the only way it was possible to do so, namely, in terms of a critique by arms, the excision of colonial rule from the history of *bahubol*, hence the exclusion of *bahubol* from the history of colonial rule, prevented the agenda for an alternative historiography from being put into effect even as it was formulated and urged with such fervour.

But if Bankimchandra had no use for *bahubol* as an element of the power relations of colonialism, why did he posit that concept in the first place? For by doing so and limiting its deployment to pre-colonial India, he certainly got himself into a tangle of his own making, as should be easy to demonstrate by considering *bahubol* together with the notion of *jatipratishtha* (nation formation) which was no less germane to his historical thinking. He connected these two ideas in the very article of the *kalamka* series, 'Bharat-kalamka', which had all of its concluding part taken up by a discussion of *jatipratishtha*.⁹⁴ The latter had never been a part of the Indian historical experience in pre-colonial times except on three occasions, according to him. The Aryans had constituted themselves as a nation or nationality (these two English phrases were, for him, synonymous with *jati*) in the Vedic and the immediate post-Vedic period; and subsequently, the Marathas and the Sikhs, too, had done the same, each for a short while, under their respective leaders, Sivaji and Ranjit Singh. Excluding these three instances, the pre-colonial past, he argued, had been conspicuous by the absence of nationhood, because it lacked in both of the conditions without which a people could never form itself into a nation. The first of these conditions, a positive condition, consisted of a sense of unity (*aikyajnan*)—a threefold unity of common counsel, common opinion and common action. The second condition, a negative one, required, he wrote in a somewhat Machiavellian vein, that the interests of one's own nation had to be promoted, if necessary—and it was necessary in most cases—by harming those of other nations, even if that meant putting the latter down by force (*parajati-piran*), that is, by *bahubol*.

It was Bankimchandra's view that neither of these necessary conditions was given in the pre-colonial polity. For one thing, the diversities of Indian life—territorial, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversities—combined to defeat the sense of unity not only at the all-India level, but regionally as well. 'The Bengalis do not have a sense

of unity as a Bengali nationality, the Sikhs do not have a sense of unity as a Sikh nationality,' he deplored. And since there was no nationhood, there was nothing to defend by force. '*Jatipratishtha* disappeared from India long ago for a variety of reasons.... Precisely because it disappeared, rulers of all other nationalities were installed as rulers of the Hindu kingdoms by the [Hindu] society itself without a fight. That is why Hindu society never lifted a finger to defend its independence.' The sum of the argument was, therefore, to say that barring three solitary instances, there was no *jatipratishtha* in pre-colonial India because there was no sense of unity (*aikyajnan*), and since there was no nationhood to fight for, there was no *bahubol*.

What a glaring inconsistency! The theory of *jatipratishtha* demolished in effect the construction of Hindu prowess in pre-colonial India by the concept of *bahubol*. The inconsistency is further aggravated by Bankimchandra's acknowledgement, in the concluding lines of the same seminal essay, 'Bharat-kalamka', that love of independence and nation-formation, which had been unknown to the Hindus, were intellectual gifts bestowed on us by our 'great benefactors' (*paramopakari*), the English. Why, one is tempted to ask, were these gifts not used by the author to develop a critique of colonial rule which, too, was bestowed on us by the same 'great benefactors'? How is it, one wonders, that he came so tantalizingly close to identifying British dominance as the proper object both of his theory of *jatipratishtha* and his concept of *bahubol* and yet missed it?

We puzzle about such questions because there is enough evidence to suggest that Bankimchandra was not altogether unaware of the bearing of these concepts on the power relations of colonialism. Confronted with it from time to time by the logic of his own discourse he would respond with a quick defensive gesture that was eloquent with the anxieties which stimulated it. Thus, when the rigour of his argument in a well-known essay forced on him the question, 'Are independence and

dependence then equivalent to you?' his riposte was to say, 'Our submission to those who speak thus is that we are not engaged in debating such issues. We are a dependent nation and shall remain in a state of dependence for a long time yet. It is not for us to debate such issues.'⁹⁵ An evasive reply, it did more to reveal than hide the censoring mechanism he used to muzzle himself when it came to addressing critically the question of power under the conditions of colonial rule. The same kind of self-censorship was at work again when the author, speaking in the voice of the Chikitsak, stopped Satyananda from exercising *bahubol* against the British, although he had just used it convincingly to defeat the Muslims at the battle of Anandamath.

All of which goes to show how the need for a critique of colonialism pressed itself again and again on Bankimchandra's work in both its discursive forms—that is, the essay and the novel, and how he evaded that critique. However, in thinking, as in writing, the outcome of such games of evasion does not always favour the subject. Slippages occur. As the psychopathology of everyday life demonstrates so well, phrases we are so careful not to utter may suddenly give us the slip, and a slip of the tongue can expose what is repressed more amply than an entire affidavit. There is an instance of such a parapraxis which managed to defy the vigilance of Bankimchandra's self-censorship. This occurred in the course of one of his many obsessive references to the sack of Nabadwip by Bakhtyar Khilji and his horsemen, and his equally obsessive attempt to prove that this was a lie invented by a Muslim chronicler. 'The history of Bengal abounds in such [misrepresentations],' he wrote. 'According to such history, a handful of English and Telinga troops are said to have destroyed thousands of native soldiers to win a spectacular victory at the battle of Plassey. This is mere fiction. No real battle was fought at Plassey. It was all a farce.'⁹⁶

A chain of associations by which the battle of Plassey substituted for the sack of Nabadwip and the

English for the Musalman in this parapraxis, rendered the censorship of a conscious will inoperative for a moment and thus enabled a hitherto repressed idea to manifest itself by assigning the colonizers, for once, as the object of *bahubol* in a historically decisive battle for power. It is easy therefore to see, in the light of this slippage, how, conversely, the force of ideology had brought about a series of displacements to make the Musalman rather than the British the object of *bahubol* and the remote, pre-colonial past rather than the recent, colonial past its temporal site. The inconsistency between Bankimchandra's theory of *jatipratishtha* and his notion of *bahubol* which we have noticed a little while ago, was a symptom of this displacement. By putting *bahubol* in the wrong place in Indian history, that is, by displacing it to the pre-colonial period, it robbed the concept of its true historical vocation as an indispensable element of that critique without which the formation of nationhood, hence the writing of its history, would not be possible in the era of imperialism.

It was thus that elements of rationalist thought imbibed from a Western-style education, the development of a vernacular prose and, above all, an incipient nationalism converged on Bankimchandra's genius to produce the nineteenth-century agenda for an Indian historiography of India. But there was nothing in liberal ideology yet to enable the Indian intellectual to put that agenda into effect. For the critique of the fundamental power relations of colonialism, the critique which would question the very necessity of colonialism itself and without which that agenda could not be effectuated into historiography, was still beyond the ken of liberal politics.

It would not be until the first decade of the twentieth century that a nationalist view of the past would arm itself with such a critique and act upon that agenda to produce the first truly Indian historiography of India. In doing so, it would fire itself by the militancy

of the less conciliatory tendencies within the Swadeshi movement and more than anything else, by the uncompromising anti-imperialist stance of the revolutionary-terrorist movements. It would derive much of its passion from a symptomatic reading of Bankimchandra's historiographical essays and historical novels and exploit the slippages and inconsistencies of his discourse to recuperate the suggestions of a radical critique which he had himself taken so much care to excise and suppress by self-censorship and evasion. The thresholds set up by the cautious and calculating loyalism of nineteenth-century liberal thought would henceforth be ignored by a new patriotic historiography which made up by its vigour what it lacked in finesse and discrimination characteristic of some of the best colonialist and loyalist writings. But with all its crudity, this still predominantly petty-bourgeois discourse would use its prides and prejudices to stake out for the first time a claim to the entire period of colonial rule as an *Indian past*, hence as a proper subject for an *autonomous Indian historiography*.

This struggle for expropriating the expropriators of the recent Indian past was, of course, not eligible for official patronage. An unauthorized alternative to colonialist discourse, pitted against the latter from its inception, it would have no place for a long time yet in class-rooms and curricula. Far from being promoted as an aid to the education of the young, it was often to be classified as forbidden reading for all—young and old. Some of this new historical literature would be identified not only as misguided deviation from the rulers' own view of the record of the Raj, but more gravely, as a threat to the security of the Raj itself. Not a few exercises in this genre of historiography, of which Saktharam Ganesh Deuskar's *Deshar Katha* was one, entered the dreaded list of seditious books and pamphlets. Produced in secrecy by small backstreet printers, often at much risk to their persons and properties, these publications circulated among a clandestine readership, passing from hand to hand, until the relay would be disrupted at a dawn raid and the last reader,

usually a schoolboy or an unemployed youth in a mufassil town, taken to the local police station together with the offending object as an exhibit in support of the Crown's case against a member or sympathizer of a militant nationalist *samiti*. That was the price that Indian historiography had to pay as it moved into the twentieth century to act upon Bankimchandra's agenda by defying him and using the concept of *bahubol* to develop a critique not only of the administrative performance of the colonial rulers, but of their right to rule.

NOTES

1. *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. II (Sahitya Samsad edition; Calcutta, Bengali Year 1371), p. 337. Our notation for all subsequent references to this work will be *BR II*.
2. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Sixth edition; Oxford, 1976).
3. Cited by Firminger in his 'Historical Introduction', p. cxx, in Walter Kelly Firminger (ed.), *The Fifth Report...on the Affairs of the East India Company...1812*, 3 vols. (Calcutta, 1917). Mentioned hereafter as *The Fifth Report*.
4. *The Fifth Report*, II, p. 159.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
6. These opinions were expressed by Grant in his letter of 27 April 1786 to the Governor-General, John Macpherson, enclosing his work, *An Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Finances of Bengal*. It was in recognition of his expertise that the Governor-General and Council 'created the office of Chief Sheristadar in favour of Mr Grant' on 19 July 1786. Firminger, 'Historical Introduction', p. xxx, n. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
9. On this point, see Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', in White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore and London, 1987), pp. 21-23.
10. *The Fifth Report*, II, p. 169.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-55.
12. *BR II*, p. 680.
13. Anil Chandra Das Gupta (ed.), *The Days of the John Company. Selections from Calcutta Gazette 1824-1852* (Calcutta, 1959), p. 229. This work will be cited hereafter as *Calcutta Gazette*.

14. For the concepts used in this paragraph, see Louis Hjelmslev, *Language, An Introduction* (Madison and London, 1970), pp. 97-114, and Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London, 1977), pp. 48-58 *et passim*.
15. Quoted in R. Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 155.
16. *Calcutta Gazette*, pp. 226-27.
17. That figure has been worked out on the basis of Professor Sushobhan Sarkar's authoritative list in his *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 1970), p. 119.
18. *Madhusudan Granthabali* (Sahitya Samsad edition; Calcutta, 1971), p. 254.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51.
20. Sivnath Shastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj* (Calcutta, Bengali Year 1362), p. 72.
21. W. H. Carey, *The Mahommedan Rebellion* (Roorkee, 1857), p. 189.
22. *Calcutta Gazette*, pp. 273-81.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 280-81.
24. Shastri, p. 74.
25. For a discussion of similarity and contiguity as aspects of the relation between signs and their objects, see Roman Jakobson, 'Visual and Auditory Signs' in his *Selected Writings, II: Word and Language* (The Hague and Paris, 1971), pp. 334-37.
26. This distinction and the arguments which follow from it, are based on V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 68-69. The direct quotations are also taken from this work, unless otherwise mentioned.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 69 and n. 3.
28. Shastri, p. 74.
29. *Calcutta Gazette*, p. 273.
30. Volosinov, p. 69.
31. *Calcutta Gazette*, p. 273.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
33. *BR II*, p. 680.
34. Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* (Harmondsworth, 1963), *passim*.
35. Sisir Kumar Das, *Early Bengali Prose* (Calcutta, 1966), Chh. iv-v, and Susil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (second edition; Calcutta, 1962), pp. 144-206, are among the best assessments on these questions.
36. Both Das and De have cited instances of such inauthenticity.
37. Cf. Karl Marx: '...just like the rest of Continental Western Europe, we suffer not only from the development of capita-

- list production, but also from the incompleteness of that development.' *Capital*, vol. I (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 91.
38. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London, 1966), Ch. 6 *passim*.
 39. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (Methuen, 1982), pp. 148-49.
 40. Shastri, pp. 252-53. Shastri is obviously in error when he mentions 1864 as the date of publication of *Durgeshnandini*. It should be, of course, 1865.
 41. *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13 (Centenary Edition; Calcutta, Bengali Year 1368), p. 891. Cited hereafter as RR 13.
 42. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, 1986), p. 13.
 43. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
 44. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
 45. Carey to Ryland (15 June 1801) cited in Eustace Carey's *Memoirs of William Carey* (London, 1836), pp. 453-54.
 46. There is a general agreement on this point among such scholars as Nikhilnath Ray, Jadunath Sarkar, Sushil Kumar De and Sisir Kumar Das. See, for instance, De, pp. 146-54 and Das, pp. 78-82.
 47. Our references to this work, *Rajabali*, are all to its third edition published in Serampore in 1822.
 48. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
 49. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 50. References to this work, in this essay, are all to its sixth edition, published posthumously in Calcutta in 1884 as *Nabanari Arthat Prachin O Adhunik Noy Narir Jibancharita (Mritya) Nilmani Basak Kartrik Samgrihita*.
 51. These are Sita, Savitri, Sakuntala, Damayanti, Draupadi, Lilavati and Khana. The only non-mythical lives included in the collection are those of Ahalyabai and Rani Bhabani.
 52. All citations in this paragraph are from the author's preface (*bijnapon*) to *Nabanari*.
 53. Cited in the editor's introduction to *Madhusudan Rachanabali*.
 54. Cited in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Nilmani Basak (and) Harachandra Ghosh* (Sahitya-sadhak-charitmalā; Calcutta, Year 1351), pp. 20-22.
 55. Benoy Ghosh (ed.), *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitra*, vol. I (Calcutta, 1962), p. 297. Emphasis added. Cited hereafter as SPBS I.
 56. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-36, 297-99, 322.
 57. *Madhusudan Rachanabali*, Introduction, p. 26.
 58. 'Bhasha' in *Ibid.*, pp. 175-76.
 59. See 'Anushthan' in *Vedanta Grantha*.

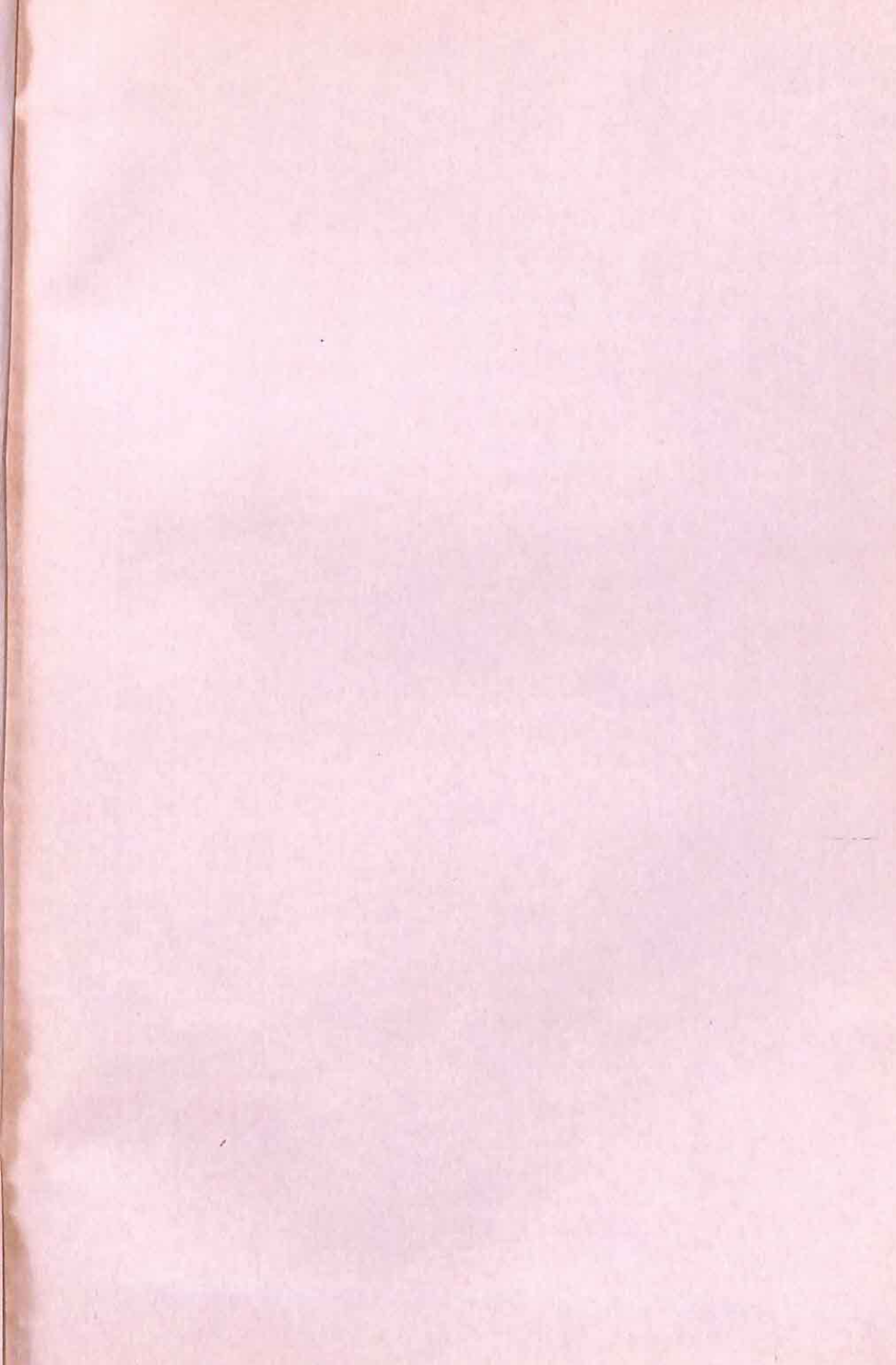
60. Author's preface (p. v) to *Introduction to the Bengalee Language, Adapted to Students who Know English*. By a Native (Calcutta, 1850). The 'native' is identified as Shyamacharan Sarma Sarkar in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Shyamacharan Sarma Sarkar; Ramchandra Mitra* (Sahitya-Sadhak-Charitmalā; Calcutta, Bengali Year 1350), p. 21. There is an observation made by Sarkar also to the same effect in his *Bangla Vyakaran*, published in 1852. See Bandyopadhyay, *ibid.*, p. 23.
61. De, p. 224.
62. For this comparison, I have used the extract from Marshman's *Bharatvarsher Itihas*, vol. I, as reproduced in De, *ibid.*, p. 225, and the corresponding extract from Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaja Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram* in Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta, 1954), pp. 750-51.
63. White, pp. 16, 17, 21.
64. Noam Chomsky, 'Implications for Language Teaching' in J. P. B. Allen and Paul Van Buren (eds), *Chomsky: Selected Readings* (London, 1971), p. 156.
65. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York, 1968, 1972), p. 116.
66. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 4. The same point is made also in his *Language and Mind*, p. 117, and *Rules and Representation* (Oxford, 1980), p. 222.
67. Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, p. 116.
68. See *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Oxford, 1967), First Part: Abstract Right, (i) Property, pp. 40-57, and Addenda to paras 44, 51, 59, 65.
69. For the concepts of 'dead labour' and 'surplus labour-time' used here, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 325, 342.
70. 'A person puts his will into a thing—that is just the concept of property, and the next step is the *realization* of this concept. The inner act of will which consists in saying that something is mine, must also be recognizable by others.' Hegel, p. 237.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
73. The editions of these works consulted by us are: (1) Krishnachandra Ray, *Bharatvarsher Itihas*. *Ingrejdiger Adhikarkal* (Seventh edition; Calcutta, 1868); (2) Kantichandra Rarhi, *Bharatvarshe Ingraj Rajatwer Samkshipta Itihas* (Calcutta, 1874); and (3) Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, *Pratham Siksha*

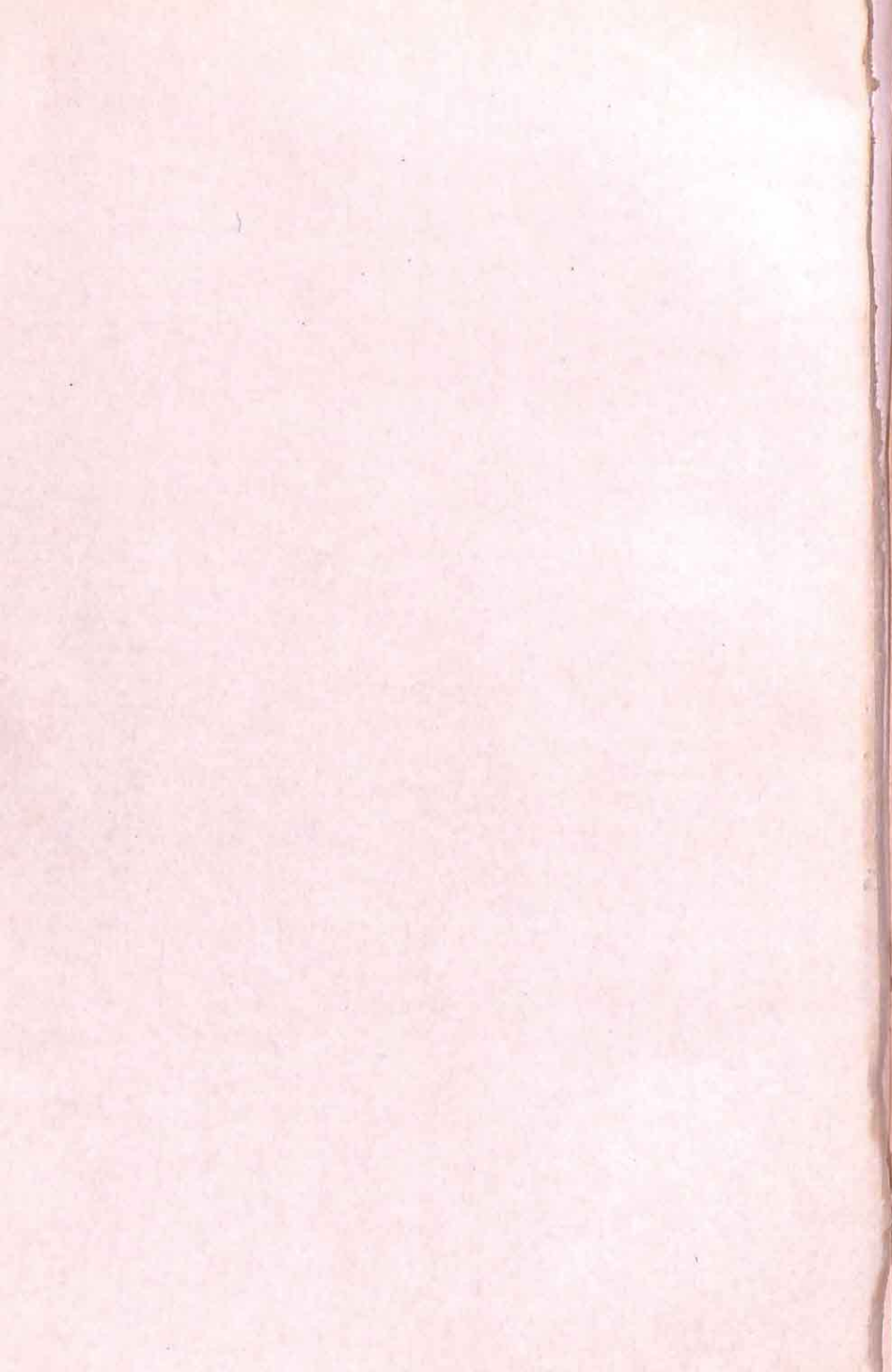
Bangalar Itihas (Calcutta, 1875). The author of (1) was mentioned as a pupil of Ishwarchandra Gupta in a letter to the editor of *Sambad Prabhakar* of 23 May 1857 (*SPBS I*, p. 222). Bankimchandra's words of praise for (3) occur in his review of the book in *Bangadarshan* (Bengali Year 1281) and reproduced in *BR II*, p. 331. One-third of the book (pp. 69-100), a general history of Bengal, is devoted to 'Ingrej Shasankal' (period of British rule), written up in thirty-one sections.

74. *RR 13*, p. 472.
75. Our references to these works are to recent reprints, viz. Gupta, parts I-IV (Calcutta, 1981-82) and Maitreya (Calcutta, 1983).
76. See Romesh Chunder Dutt, *Cultural Heritage of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1962), p. 152, and *RR 13*, p. 473.
77. *RR 13*, p. 476. For Tribedi's comments cited here and later on, see his essay 'Rajanikanta Gupta' included in Gupta I.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 475.
79. Maitreya, p. 295.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
81. Gupta IV, pp. 217-24.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
84. See editor's introduction ('Sahitya Prasanga') to *BR II*, p. 22.
85. *BR II*, p. 336.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
87. Hegel, p. 239.
88. *BR II*, p. 333.
89. See, for instance, the opening paragraphs of the essays, 'Bangalar Itihas Sambandhey Koyekti Katha'. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
90. *Ibid.*, pp. 234, 337 *et passim*.
91. *Ibid.*, pp. 330, 336.
92. These essays, with the date of publication according to the Bengali year shown for each of them in parentheses, are as follows: 'Bharat-kalamka' (1279), 'Bangalar Itihas' (1281), 'Bangalar Itihas Sambandhe Koyekti Katha' (1287), 'Bangalar Itihaser Bhagnangsha' (1289), and 'Bangalar Kalamka' (1291). All are included in *BR II*.
93. These six citations are used by the author to illustrate the military superiority of Hindus of Bengal to those of Bihar, Orissa and southern India. However, these have no bearing on the dispute about Hindu prowess in general. Since both the sides involved in each of these trials of *bahubol* were Hindus, the proven weakness of Hindus as the vanquished cancelled out their proven weakness as the victors.

94. *BR II*, pp. 239-41, is our source for the summary of Bankimchandra's argument in this and the next paragraph as well as for all direct quotations not otherwise identified.
95. This exchange occurs in the concluding paragraph of the essay, 'Bharatbarsher Swadhinata ebam Paradhinata', in *BR II*, p. 245.
96. *BR II*, p. 337.



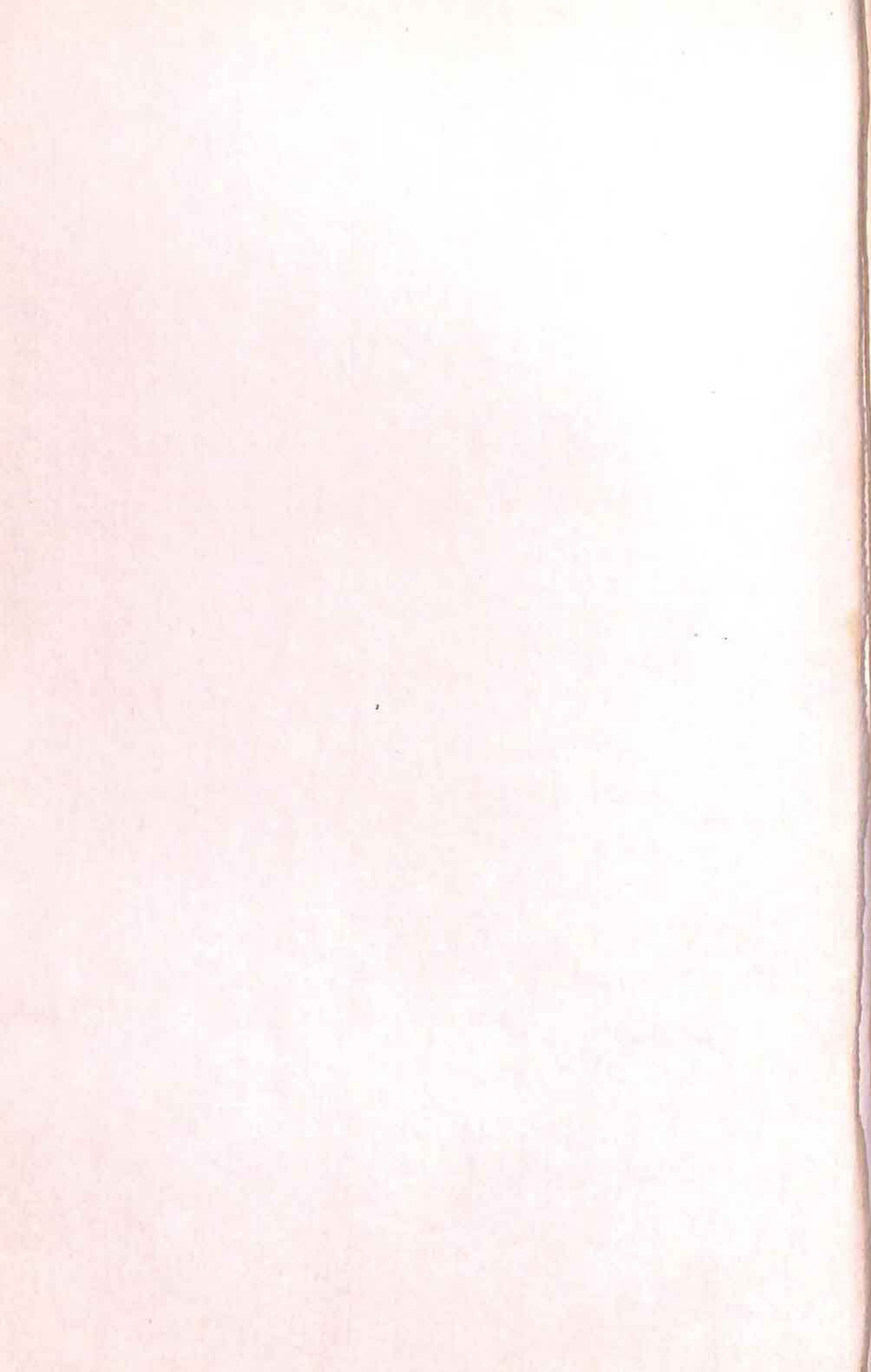
















An Indian Historiography of India :
A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its Implications

Ranajit Guha

(S. G. Deuskar Lectures on Indian History, 1987)

To become a nation, Bankimchandra said in 1880, a country must have its own history. In this series of three lectures, Ranajit Guha examines the implications of that nineteenth-century agenda for Indian historiography. The British, he argues, turned to the writing of Indian history as the only means by which they could appropriate for themselves the living past of a colonised people. For the new Indian intelligentsia, on the other hand, history became the first form through which they could narrativise their transition to a state of subjection. By a penetrating survey of colonialist and Bengali historiography in the nineteenth century, Guha depicts the field of Indian history-writing as a site still unconquered for a truly autonomous history of India.

Ranajit Guha is now at the Australian National University, Canberra. He is the author of *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1963), *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) and editor of the series *Subaltern Studies*.

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